

Exhibition: *The Jeweled Isle: Art from Sri Lanka*

On View: December 9, 2018–June 23, 2019

Location: Resnick Pavilion



Image captions on page 4

(Los Angeles—October 18, 2018) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is pleased to present *The Jeweled Isle: Art from Sri Lanka*, the first comprehensive survey of Sri Lankan art organized by a U.S. museum. Drawn in part from LACMA’s collection of Sri Lankan art, and including numerous domestic and international loans, the exhibition presents some 250 works addressing nearly two millennia of Sri Lankan history. In 2009, Sri Lanka emerged from a nearly 30 year-long civil war fought along ethnic and religious divides. *The Jeweled Isle* presents a timely exploration and celebration of a geographically complex, ethnically diverse, and multicultural South Asian hub.

The exhibition is curated by Dr. Robert L. Brown and Dr. Tushara Bindu Gude, of LACMA’s South and Southeast Asian Art Department, and is designed by Los Angeles-based architecture firm Escher GuneWardena Architecture.

“LACMA has a long history of collecting South and Southeast Asian art and its Sri Lankan holdings are more expansive and diverse in range than those found in any other U.S. collection,” said LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director Michael Govan. “These works are at the heart of this exhibition.”

According to the exhibition curators, “Sri Lankan culture developed in a complex web of foreign influences and local customs that have never been fully explored in previous exhibitions. These multiple influences were woven together in a fusion that is uniquely Sri Lankan. The art shown in *The Jeweled Isle* reflects this development and also offers a window onto Sri Lanka’s rich history and culture.”

About the Exhibition

The image of a bejeweled isle, invoked in ancient Sanskrit texts and in Greco-Roman accounts of Sri Lanka's precious gems, inspired numerous literary descriptions of the island's wealth and lush tropical beauty. The notion of "jewels" is apparent throughout the exhibition, which includes precious decorative objects fashioned from gold, silver, and ivory, and 19th-century photographs documenting Sri Lanka's extraordinary monuments, people, landscapes, and flora.

Many of the photographs convey the importance of sacred sites and relics in Sri Lankan Buddhist practice, which are explored through the exhibition's presentation of art associated with three of Sri Lanka's historical capitals—Anuradhapura, Polonnaruva, and Kandy. While many religious sculptures, paintings, and architectural fragments from these sites variously express the so-called "jewels" of Buddhism, Hinduism was also an important part of the island's cultural and religious fabric. The exhibition includes rare images of Hindu gods and Indian deities that attest to the long and constant interaction, in particular, between Sri Lanka and South India. Exquisite ivories, textiles, and furnishings further reflect nearly four centuries of European colonial presence in Sri Lanka and the dynamic interaction between local and foreign visual forms and traditions.

Exhibition Organization

Sri Lanka had been known to the ancient world since the 4th century BCE when Greek mariners first caught wind of a fabulous jeweled-bearing island somewhere beyond India. Evoking this sense of ancient wonder, the opening gallery of the exhibition features a display of 21 precious gemstones that were mined in Sri Lanka. This section also introduces the diversity of Sri Lanka's religious and artistic traditions. In addition to Buddhist artworks, it includes an important set of shrine panels that addresses the Buddhist incorporation of Indian gods, some clearly Hindu, into a protective pantheon. Impressive masks and painted earthenware vessels used in festivals and healing rituals further attest to the range of practices associated with popular and folk religious observances.

Following the introductory gallery, *The Jeweled Isle* is loosely organized around three chronological sections that examine the major capitals of Sri Lankan history: **Anuradhapura** (3rd century BCE–10th century CE), **Polonnaruva** (11th–13th century), and **Kandy** (15th–19th century). Together, these sections address themes such as the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, Buddhism's accommodation of indigenous deities and beliefs, the interaction between Hinduism and Buddhism, and

the connection of Sri Lankan kingship to the possession of Shakyamuni Buddha's tooth relic, which remains the most venerated object in Sri Lanka. Various sub-sections of the exhibition address multiple, often interrelated, facets of Sri Lankan art including the relationship between Indian and Sri Lankan culture and visual forms; Portuguese and Dutch mercantile expansion on the island; the establishment of British colonial power; the development of Sri Lankan decorative traditions; the richness of Sri Lankan courtly arts; and the legacy of Sri Lanka in the modern day. As Buddhism is the dominant religion in Sri Lanka, and was an important focus for artistic expression throughout the island's history, Buddhist visual traditions can be seen in nearly all the sections of the show. The section on Kandy, the last independent kingdom in Sri Lanka and the present home of the tooth relic, includes a special focus on the arts associated with the Perahara, the annual procession of this revered relic.

An important anchor throughout the exhibition is provided by late 19th-century British colonial photographs which provide a context for many of the objects on view. Archaeological and architectural photographs, in particular, constitute an important record of Sri Lanka under British rule. They convey the significance of place in Sri Lankan Buddhism and allude to colonial narratives regarding the island's history. The photographs include works by Joseph Lawton (active Sri Lanka, c. 1860–72), 1860–1872), Charles T. Scowen and Co. (active in Sri Lanka c. 1875–94), W.L.H. Skeen and Co. (active in Sri Lanka c. 1860–1920), and others. British photographic studios in Sri Lanka addressed a range of subjects, including the natural wealth of the island. Charles T. Scowen produced a number of extraordinary botanical studies in the former royal gardens at Kandy, several of which have been brought together for this exhibition.

The final gallery of *The Jeweled Isle* includes a contemporary artwork by California-based artist Lewis deSoto (b. 1954). DeSoto's large inflatable sculpture is inspired by the massive 12th-century stone carving of the reclining Buddha at the Gal Vihara (Rock Monastery) in Polonnaruwa. The artist's work serves as a commentary on the power of the Buddha's teaching and the visual impact of the Sri Lankan Buddha image. Also included in this gallery are photographs by Reg van Cuylenburg (1926–1988) a Sri Lankan photographer who undertook several tours across Sri Lanka between 1949 and 1958, documenting the various places he visited, the festivals he witnessed, and the people he encountered. As a counterpoint to the colonial photographic archive, van Cuylenburg's photographs, taken in the optimistic years following Sri Lanka's independence in 1948, represent a Sri Lankan's own view of a much beloved homeland.

Related Programming

Opening Ceremony Performance

Sunday, December 16 | 10 am

Smidt Welcome Plaza | Free and open to the public

Join us for an oil lamp lighting ceremony followed by traditional Sri Lankan dances and drumming to celebrate the opening of the exhibition. Featured performances by the Sri Lanka Foundation Performing Arts and Thath Jith Dance Company.

This program was made possible by the Consulate General of Sri Lanka to Western States USA.

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Credit: This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, mirroring Los Angeles's rich cultural heritage and uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 139,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of art history from new and unexpected points of view. A museum of international stature as well as a vital cultural center for Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collection with the Greater Los Angeles County and beyond through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over 1.5 million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions more through community partnerships, school outreach programs, and creative digital initiatives. LACMA's main campus is located halfway between the ocean and downtown, adjacent to the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the future home of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Dedicated to serving all of Los Angeles, LACMA collaborates with a range of curators, educators, and artists on exhibitions and programs at various sites throughout the County.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

Image captions

(Left) Scowen & Co., *Kandian Chief*, c. 1870, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (Center, left) *Buddha Shakyamuni*, Kandy period, 18th century, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Murray and Virginia Ward, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (Center, right) *Buddha Shakyamuni and Attendants*, 18th century, ivory with paint; ebony frame, 7 3/8 x 5 1/2 x 1 1/4 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Christian Humann, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA; (Right) *Hair Ornament*, 1873, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul E. Manheim and the Indian Art Special Purpose Fund (M.83.3.1), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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