

Thai Art Motifs Glossary

This glossary lists the most important motifs in Thai artistic tradition. These themes primarily refer to Buddhism; Buddhist and [Hindu mythology](#) which combine with local Thai traditions. In this context, you might also want to check out my post about [Thai mythical creatures](#) and [The Buddha Image in Thai Culture](#).

Amitabha	'The Buddha of Infinite Light' in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism who lives in the Western Paradise, the 'Pure Land'. By calling upon him, one can be reborn in his paradise and thus ensure the attainment of Buddhahood in one's next rebirth. This Buddha is also called Avalokitesvara.
Apsaras	Celestial nymphs who sing and dance for the pleasure of gods and fallen heroes.
Avalokitesvara	The 'Lord who looks down with compassion', the most popular bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. He is an emanation of the Amitabha Buddha and wears an image of the latter in his headdress. He also appears in the form of Padmapani.

Avatar	The descent of a deity from heaven to earth. The term usually refers to one of the ten reincarnations on earth of the god Vishnu.
Bencharong	This term, meaning “five colours” was applied to a type of enamelled porcelain originally made in China to Thai specifications.
Bodhisattva	In Mahayana Buddhism, a being who has achieved enlightenment but renounces Buddhahood until all beings reach the same goal by the saving power of his compassion. In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism the term is also applied to the earlier lives of the historical Buddha as well as to Gautama prior to his enlightenment.
Bodhi Tree	The sacred tree (ficus religiosa) under which Gautama meditated and achieved enlightenment, becoming henceforth known as the Buddha. In early Buddhist art, aniconic symbols such as the Bodhi tree were used to indicate the presence of the Buddha in a scene.

<p>Brahma</p>	<p>The creator in the Hindu trinity (Vishnu is the preserver and Shiva the destroyer). Frequently depicted with four faces and four arms, he appears in Buddhist art, along with Indra, as an attendant of the Buddha.</p>
<p>Buddha</p>	<p>An enlightened being who has achieved a perfect understanding of the causes of human suffering and the means whereby to overcome them, thereby being freed from all further rebirth. In Theravada Buddhism the term is restricted to the historic Buddha who lived in the 6th c. B.C. (Siddhartha Gautama) and to a series of Buddhas who appeared on earth in previous eras (but did not preach the doctrine), or Maitreya, the Buddha of the future.</p>
<p>Chakra</p>	<p>Wheel, disc, symbol of the sun, attribute of the god Vishnu. In Buddhism, the Wheel is the symbol of the doctrine which the Buddha set into motion when he preached the first sermon.</p>

Chakri	The dynasty that has reigned in Thailand since 1782.
Chedi	In Thailand it is used to signify a solid religious monument built to enshrine the relics of the Buddha or holy men, and also to contain the ashes of the dead. The terms <i>chedi</i> and <i>stupa</i> are often interchangeable.
Deva (male), Devi (female)	A celestial being who lives in one of the six lower heavens of Buddhist cosmology.
Ekamukhalinga	Phallic symbol of the god Shiva adorned with the god's face carved in relief.
Erawan	The three-headed elephant, vehicle of the god Indra.
Garuda	A mythical bird, king of the birds and natural enemy of the nagas. It has a human body but the wings, legs and beak of a bird. It is the vehicle of the god Vishnu.

<p>Gautama</p>	<p>The clan name of the historic Buddha who was called Siddhartha as a prince; Gautama when he became an ascetic; and the Buddha after he achieved Enlightenment.</p>
<p>Himaphan</p>	<p>A mythical forest in Buddhist cosmology located in the Himalayas below the heavens of the gods, inhabited by both real and imaginary animals.</p>
<p>Hinayana</p>	<p>‘Lesser Way’ or ‘Lesser Means of Progression’ a derogatory term used by Mahayana Buddhists in referring to the non-Mahayana-sect, in particular the Theravada which claims to be closer to the original teachings of the Buddha.</p>
<p>Jataka</p>	<p>‘Birth Story’, referring to the 547 tales of the previous lives of the Buddha. In Thailand, the 10 lives preceding the Buddha’s birth as Prince Siddhartha Gautama are most popular, and are frequently depicted in mural paintings. Each story represents a virtue practised to perfection.</p>

<p>Kinnara (male), Kinnari (female)</p>	<p>A divine musician, half-human and half-bird in form who lives in the Himaphan forest.</p>
<p>Kranok</p>	<p>A flame-like design popular in the decorative elements of Thai art.</p>
<p>Mahayana Buddhism</p>	<p>'Greater Way' or 'Greater Means of Progression', a major branch of Buddhism emerging in Northern India at the beginning of the Christian era and attaching essential importance to speculations on the nature of the Buddhas and to the role of the bodhisattvas. It is often called Northern Buddhism because it is chiefly practised in Nepal, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam.</p>
<p>Maitreya</p>	<p>In both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism the Buddha of the future, who is at present bodhisattva dwelling in Tusita heaven. In sculpture, he is depicted with a stupa in his headdress.</p>

Mara	Personified evil, sensual pleasure and delusion, tempter of the Buddha. At Enlightenment the Buddha achieved victory over Mara and all that he represents.
Meru (also Sumeru)	A mythical mountain, the centre of the universe around which the continents and oceans are placed. Located on Mount Meru is Tavatimsa heaven ruled by Indra.
Muchalinda	King of the nagas who protects the meditating Buddha during a storm shortly after his Enlightenment by surrounding him with his coils and sheltering him with his multi-headed hood.

Mudra

The ritual gesture of the hands, each gesture indicates a specific action or power. In Theravada Buddhist art, the principal mudras are as follows:*Abhaya mudra*: gesture of reassurance or Dispelling Fear (for example, [the Buddha Monthon](#) performs this mudra).*Bhumisparsa mudra* or *Maravijaya mudra*: gesture of victory over Mara or Calling the Earth Witness.*Dharmachakra mudra*: gesture of Preaching the First Sermon or Setting the Wheel of Law in Motion.*Dhyana mudra*: gesture of Meditation*Vara mudra*: gesture of charity or Bestowing Favours.*Vitarka mudra*: gesture of Teaching. In Thailand, this gesture executed with both hands, is called Descending from Tavatimsa Heaven.

<p style="text-align: center;">Naga</p>	<p>A snake or serpentine divinity that dwells in the subterranean and water regions. Nagas guard the hidden treasures of the earth and control rainfalls. They are the arch enemies of the garudas. The struggle between the two is a frequent theme in art.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Nirvana</p>	<p>'Extinction' or 'Blowing out', the state of release from earthly bonds, suffering and delusion, and thus liberation from the cycle of rebirths. It is the condition one attains upon enlightenment while still living on earth; the Buddha reached <i>nirvana</i> under the bodhi tree. Parinirvana is the perfect or complete <i>nirvana</i> attained at the time of death.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Padmapani</p>	<p>'He who holds the lotus', another form of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. The lotus symbolizes his creative powers.</p>

Stupa

Originally meaning a burial mound for princes in ancient India. It very early became the most important type of Buddhist monument enshrining the relics of the Buddha, of his disciples or to mark an important site in Buddhism.

A *stupa* is basically a solid monument consisting of a dome (of variable shape) supported by a base and surmounted by a tiered umbrella with differing degrees of stylization. In Thailand it has the same meaning as the word *chedi*.

<p>Tantric Buddhism</p>	<p>An advanced stage of Vajrayana Buddhism, important in Northeast India after the 8th century and surviving in Nepal and Tibet. It flourished briefly in the Khmer empire in ancient times. This school tremendously expanded the Buddhist pantheon including the creation of fearsome multi-limbed and multi-headed deities. Emphasis is placed on esoteric worship practices to enable a devotee to effect union with his god through visual images, symbols, repetition of sounds, prescribed movements and breath control. Worship of the female energy of the god is also important.</p>
<p>Tavatimsa Heaven</p>	<p>Heaven of the thirty-three gods on top of Mount Meru over which Indra presides.</p>
<p>Thepanom</p>	<p>The figure of a deva with hands in a worshipping gesture; a celestial being.</p>

Theravada Buddhism

'The School or Teaching of the Elders', it is today the only surviving school of early Buddhism. Its teaching is preserved in the Pali Canon and is used by the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Also known as Southern Buddhism. Often called Hinayana, the rather derogatory term which means 'the Lesser Way', as opposed to Mahayana, 'the Greater Way'. This sect emphasises individual effort towards Enlightenment, whereas the Mahayana abounds with bodhisattvas, or saint-like beings to whom devotees may pray for help along the way to understanding.

Vajrayana Buddhism	<p>'The Way of the Thunderbolt' or 'the Diamond Vehicle', a development in Mahayana Buddhism which began in Northeast India about 4th c. A.D. and reached its full development by the 8th c. A.D. From India, especially in its advanced Tantric form, it moved to Nepal, Tibet and China. <i>Vajrayana</i> stresses worship practices that enable the devotee to attain union with the Great Universal Spirit through the use of mystical incantation, formulas, magical diagrams, ritual gestures and yoga.</p>
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(Source: Treasures from The National Museum Bangkok, Selected by The National Museum Volunteers Group, 4th reprint 2006)