THE MANY FACES OF WATER
IN THE CULTURES OF ASIA AND OCEANIA

THE MANY FACES OF WATER IN THE CULTURES OF ASIA AND OCEANIA

CONTENTS

From the Director of the Andrzej Wawrzyniak Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw 7

Introduction 9

First civilisations 11

Landscape 13

Water as a condition for survival 23

Water in religious systems and beliefs 79

Water as a source of pleasure 111

Fauna and flora 133

Bibliography 156

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF THE ANDRZEJ WAWRZYNIAK ASIA AND PACIFIC MUSEUM IN WARSAW

For centuries, water has shaped landscapes, communities, and the imagination of the peoples of Asia and Oceania. It is an element that uniquely combines functionality with symbolism: present both in everyday life and in myths, rituals, and works of art. The impulse for initiating a broader reflection on the significance of water was a nationwide academic conference organised at the Asia and Pacific Museum in March 2024. Scholars representing various disciplines took part in the event, creating a space for interdisciplinary dialogue on the cultural roles of water, examined from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

The exhibition *The Many Faces of Water in the Cultures of Asia and Oceania* constitutes a natural continuation of the themes discussed during the conference. It seeks to present the diversity of meanings that communities of Asia and Oceania have attributed – and continue to attribute – to water: as a creative force, a source of life, an element of ritual practice, and a source of artistic inspiration. Water is not only the central theme of the exhibition, but also a point of departure for a broader reflection on the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Perhaps *The Many Faces of Water in the Cultures of Asia and Oceania* will also pave the way for further dialogue and reflection on the remaining elements within the cultures of Asia.

The contemporary world increasingly reminds us of how fragile the balance of the natural environment truly is. The climate changes we are witnessing are largely the result of intensive human activity, which inevitably affects both the availability and the quality of water resources. For this reason, today it becomes essential not only to document the cultural meanings of water, but also to engage in dialogue on shared social responsibility and to foster environmentally conscious attitudes.

Beyond fulfilling its research and educational mission, the Asia and Pacific Museum also creates a space for reflection and discussion on the necessity of caring for the environment of which we are an integral part.

Józef Zalewski, PhD

INTRODUCTION

People have often chosen areas near water to establish their settlementsto enjoy access to it. Today, apart from fulfilling the basic necessities of human life, water plays a vital role in food production, as well as the production of clothing, electronics, and energy. It also enables the transportation of goods, and in the summer, regions by the lakes, rivers and seas turn into holiday destinations.

Water bears deeply symbolic meanings, too. It appears in the cosmogonic myths, and in many religions, it is believed to possess purifying power. The exhibition presents various dimensions and functions of water from the perspective of cultures of Asia and Oceania, but at the same time, it emphasises that its symbolic meaning is universal and goes far beyond the mentioned regions. The European traditions are also rich in examples where water is granted special significance. According to Greek mythology, Goddess Aphrodite emerged from the sea foam, and in Christianity, being immersed in water or having one's head sprinkled with water during baptism – the sacrament of initiation – symbolically purifies the person and washes away the original sin.

The exhibition aims to encourage reflection on the universal significance of water in several areas of various cultures from all over the world. Equally universal are the problems related to dwindling water resources and water contamination – these affect the entire humanity, regardless of the geographical region we inhabit. Today, in the era of climate change, the protection of water resources is becoming extremely important for both the future of humanity and ecological balance.

FIRST CIVILISATIONS

Over 5000 years ago, the first cradles of civilisation emerged on Earth. Cradles of civilisation are places where cities and states developed independently of other similar human settlements. All of them, however, had one thing in common – they were located in the great river valleys. It was the rivers that made the surrounding lands fertile and this, in turn, enabled the production of food for larger groups of people.

Sedentary life is not a sufficient condition, though. We can speak of civilisation when sedentary life was combined with administrative systems, written language, the division of labour, professional specialisations, and finally, when it also involved a group of people who did not have to work to obtain food. Instead, they engaged in science, literature and art. This is how such disciplines as astronomy, mathematics and others were invented.

Archaeological excavations allow us to constantly upgrade our knowledge of ancient civilisations. The earliest known was the one located in Mesopotamia, a historical region situated within the Tigris-Euphrates River system, in modern-day Iraq and the northern parts of Syria. It was inhabited by the Sumerians who gave rise to a civilisation that existed between 3500 and 331 BCE.

Let's move to another continent – to the Nile River Valley, where a highly developed state functioned from as early as 3100 BCE until the Roman conquest in 30 BCE. Scholars have found jewellery pieces made of lapis lazuli stones there, and since this stone does not occur naturally in the region, it is thus believed that already in the times of the first civilisations, there must have existed a form of trade or exchange between Egypt and the Indus Valley Civilisation, where this stone was mined.

The Indus Valley Civilisation, sometimes also known as Harappan or Mohenjo-daro – from the largest cities excavated there, also maintained contacts with the Mesopotamian Civilisation. It developed between 2600 and 1700 BCE in the Indus and the Sarasvati River valleys, which are located in modern-day Pakistan. At the same time, in South America, the Caral-Supe Civilisation emerged in the Supe River basin, and thus in the area of modern-day Peru. It dates back to 2600–1600 BCE[1].

In the valley of the Yellow River, the Chinese Civilisation was established, with its origins commonly linked to Erlitou and Erligang cultures, which derive their names from the archaeological sites. These cultures date back to 1800–1300 BCE. Researchers associate them with the Xia and Shang dynasties, known from ancient scripts, and although they have not found irrefutable evidence of the Xia Dynasty's existence, the existence of the Shang Dynasty is confirmed by historical sources dating back to the period of its reign.

The youngest cradle is the Olmec Civilization located within the geographical borders of modern-day Mexico. It developed between 1200 and 400 BCE in the valleys of the Coatzacoalcos, the Tonalá and the San Juan River.

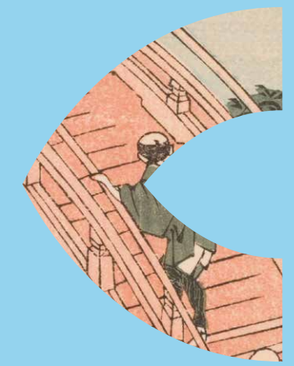
The dates of the functioning of the first civilisations, provided by researchers and specialists in the field, are the dates of their greatest bloom, and thus the period that coincided with the peak of their development. At the time, both their state and social structures had already been established, as well as their system of writing, expanded trade and specialisation of professions.

1 Józef Szykulski, *Starożytne Peru*, Wrocław, 2010, pp. 116-117.

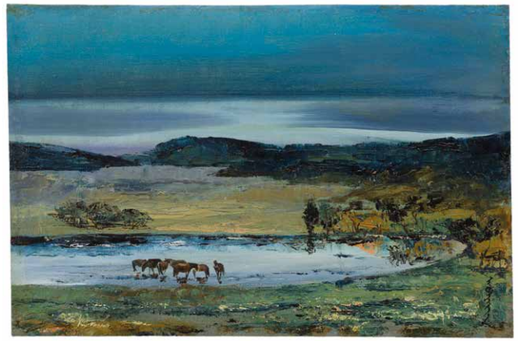
LANDSCAPE

Landscapes depicting water are not merely representations of nature. For centuries, nature, and especially water, has been considered as conveying symbolic meanings. Water can be clear and peaceful or stormy and wild. Its inherent variability can be treated as a metaphor for human emotions. Depending on the artistic means applied, it may reflect movement, tension or contemplation. Water often becomes a symbol of evanescence, peace, but also strength and the elusive character of nature.

Artists from Asia often refer to ancient painting traditions – they paint with ink on silk, make woodcut prints, and yet their works do not restrain from the universal language of contemporary art. At times, the landscape is so simplified that it almost turns into a sign, but it only strengthens its symbolic meaning and opens it up for reflection. In other images, however, by presenting water in the interaction with other aspects of nature, architecture or people, the artist may focus on decorative opulence or create elaborate sets of symbols that are fully comprehensible almost exclusively for representatives of a given culture.



Seaside landscape with *jukung* boats
Sunaryo
Indonesia, Java, Jakarta, 1983
screen print on paper
donated by the Artist
MAP 7539



Landscape with horses by the water hole
S. Bayar
Mongolia, 2nd half of the 20th c.
oil on canvas
MAP 13570

Landscape created in *Shan shui*
(mountain and water) style
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
watercolours on silk
MAP 22416

purchase co-financed from the funds of the "Development of Museum Collections Programme of the National Institute for Museums – 2025" from the budget of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage

Bali seaside landscape with boats
Srihadi Sudarsono
Indonesia, Bali, 1980
oil on canvas
donated by Stefan Olszowski
MAP 8111

"What you see in my painting is not a physical impression but rather a manifestation of the spiritual essence of the subject."[2] – Srihadi Sudarsono.
In his abstract landscapes, Srihadi would often reduce the panorama to its pure, basic forms. Through these means, he would introduce an element of perspective by modulating and saturating certain hues he may have found most striking in a particular landscape, eventually confining them in separate compositional compartments. In his seascapes, he unifies the elements of land, water and sky to bring a sense of spiritual harmony to his oeuvre.[3] In the presented painting, we can notice narrow boats surrounded by sea waves, with their red stabiliser bars shaped in a manner characteristic of the islands of Eastern Indonesia.

2 *In Memoriam: Srihadi Sudarsono, Epoch-Defining Modernist of Indonesian Art*, Sotheby's, 23.04.2022, https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/in-memoriam-srihadi-sudarsono-epoch-defining-modernist-of-indonesian-art (access: 1.09.2025).

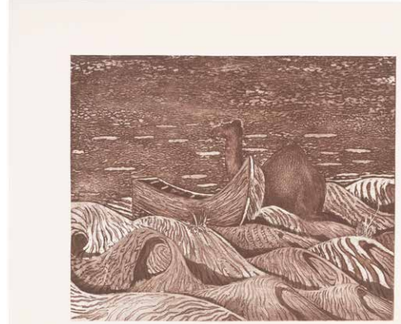
3 Ibidem.

Bridge of the Kameido Tenjin Shrine from the series "Famous Bridges"
Katsushika Hokusai (artist), Nishimuraya Yohachi (publisher)
Japan, ca. 1830
colour woodcut on handmade paper
MAP 5770

The author of the presented woodcut is Hokusai Katsushika (1760–1849), one of the most outstanding and renowned artists of the Edo period (1603–1868). The Japanese painter and artist creating colourful woodcuts became famous primarily for his *ukiyo-e* works, which literally translates as "images of the floating world." Hokusai's most famous work is the "Great Wave off Kanagawa" from the series "Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji."[4]
The artist depicted not only the figures of his contemporaries, but also natural motifs, such as flowers, birds (pheasants, roosters), turtles, as well as bridges and waterfalls.
The woodcut, being part of the Museum's collection and depicting the bridge, was made in 1801 with *nishiki-e* technique, and thus colourful woodcut which requires the use of many woodcut blocks, each responsible for a different colour in the composition. This method allowed the artist to produce a full-coloured, extremely decorative effect, characteristic of the late, mature *ukiyo-e* style.[5]

4 *Self-Portrait as a Fisherman – Katsushika Hokusai*, https://www.wikiart.org/en/katsushika-hokusai (access: 1.09.2025).

5 Seiji Nagata, Hokusai: *Genius of the Japanese Ukiyo-e*, Tokyo, 1999.



"Encounter"
Meret Klychev
Turkmenistan, 2nd half of the 20th c.
etching and aquatint on paper
donated by the Artist
MAP 15508

Hindu temple on the seashore
Nyoman Gunarsa
Indonesia, Bali, Gampingan, 1967
acrylic on paper
MAP 3028

Illustration design for the fairy tale "Fossilised Ship"
Roman Opałka
Poland, 1967
tempera, own technique on cardboard
donated by the Insurance and Reinsurance Company "Warta" S.A.
MAP 15111

Seaside landscape with a house on an island
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
cobalt underglaze painting on porcelain
MAP 18378

Waterfall
Nepal, 4th quarter of the 20th c., following the Japanese style
woodcut on paper with silk fibres
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 16863

Wooden footbridges in the Thu Thiem region in South Vietnam
Trân Duy
Vietnam, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
watercolours on silk
MAP 4636

Long, narrow boats with arched stabilisers constitute a common sight in the eastern part of Indonesia. They are used both to transport people and goods and to fish. The eyes painted on their bows bear a magical meaning – they allow the boat to "see" the right direction.

Indonesia, Bali, 2011
Photo by Maria Szymańska-Ilnata, private collection

The boats depicted in the photograph are examples of traditional flat-bottomed basket boats typical of the seacoasts of Vietnam. Longer and larger constructions of this type can be encountered closer to the northern border of the country. Such boats are lightweight, flexible, cheap and – most importantly – durable. They are used in coastal sea waters, backwaters and rivers.

Vietnam, the 1970s
Photo by Janusz Eysymont, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 11/88

Sampan boats with their characteristic shelter come in many different sizes. Smaller ones are used for everyday transportation of people and a rather insignificant quantity of goods between neighbouring villages or riverbanks. Large ones serve as a means of transport over longer distances. Building bridges in the Ganges Delta is not an easy task. The river is very wide there and during the monsoons, it floods very extensive areas (which is used to irrigate the fields) and tends to change its course. For this reason, boats and larger ferries are still used to move between the banks.

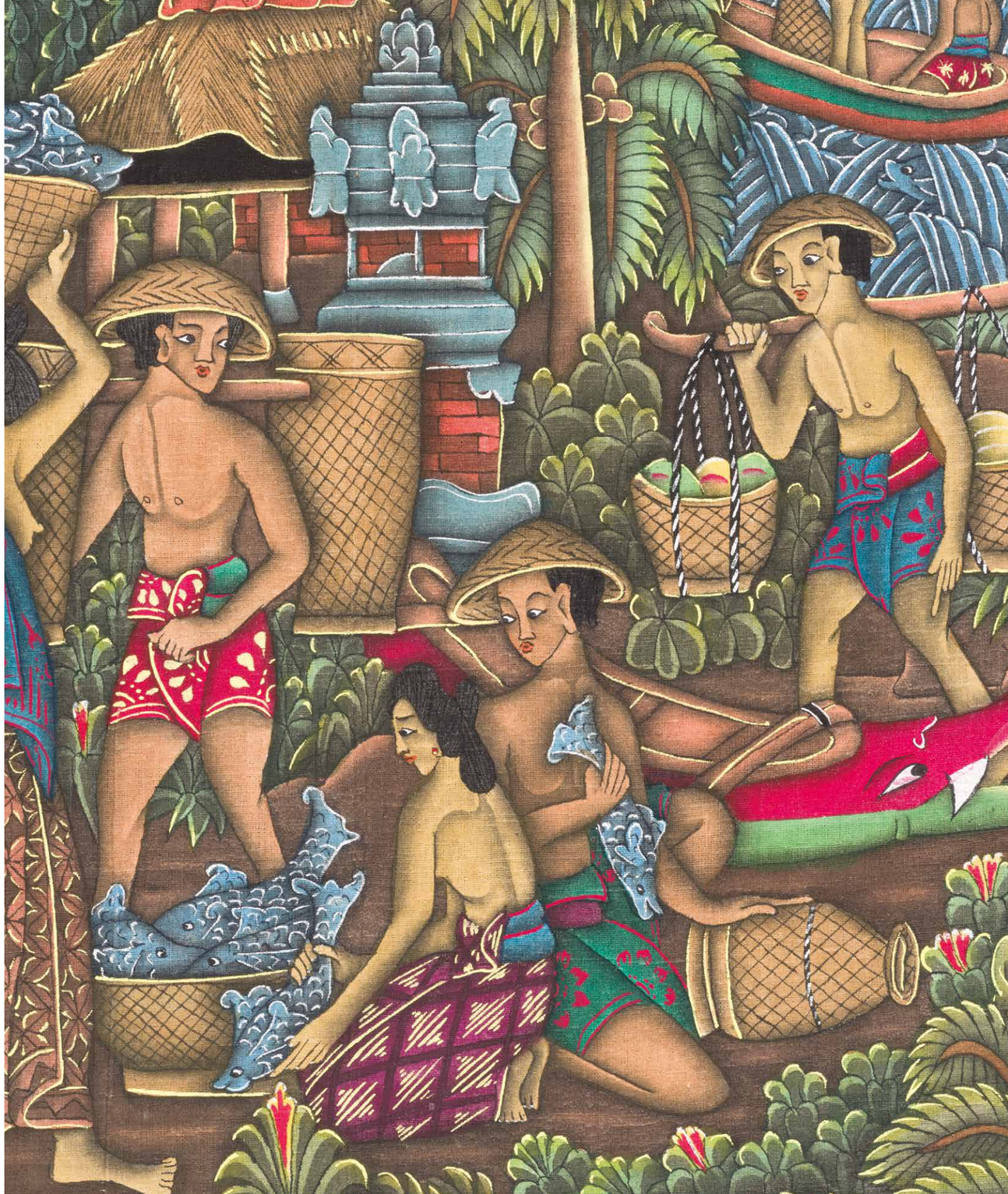
India, Bengal, 1976–1979
Photo by Tadeusz Walter, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 15/248

WATER AS A CONDITION FOR SURVIVAL

Water has always been essential for survival. Human settlements were established near rivers and lakes to enable farming, trade and the development of social life. At times, the lack of water led to the downfall of communities and the access to it often determined the position of a state in the region. Living and working near water has also been a source of inspiration for a variety of artists. Their artworks allow us to have a closer look at everyday life in different regions of Asia and Oceania.

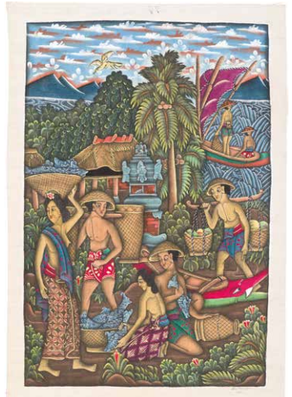
FOOD SOURCING

Water serves as a natural habitat for millions of beings – fish, mammals and shellfish – that are often used as food by humans. The exhibition presents various utensils related to traditional fishing methods, such as fishhooks and traps. Such exhibits are to encourage reflection on today's approach to the use of resources associated with water, including industrialised fish farming and excessive exploitation of fisheries by big corporations. Such activities may result in the ultimate extinction of some species living in water. They also cause the displacement and eradication of traditional fishing methods, and this poses a serious threat to local communities, such as those in the state of Kerala in India, Vietnam or the Philippines, where people still tend to use small boats and fishnets. This results not only in the loss of sources of income but also the loss of cultural identity.



Fisherman
Myanmar/Burma, 1st half of the 20th c.
bone, wood
MAP 19875

Old fisherman
Vietnam, ca. 1850
wood, lacquerware
MAP 9427



Fishing in Bali
Indonesia, Bali, the 1980s
watercolours on canvas
donated by Monika and Mieczysław Strzechowscy
MAP 21952

Fishing with a family
Peter Gixs
Papua New Guinea, Simbu, Kundiawa, 2001
acrylic on canvas
MAP 19041

Fish trap
Vanuatu, Pentecost, the 1970s
plant fibre
donated by Nicolai Michoutouchkine
MAP 9501

A basket fish trap of a very characteristic structure has a tight cone-shaped funnel, also known as a throat, through which the fish enters the trap and is unable to get out of it. Basket fish traps are common over a vast geographical area, including Poland. They take a variety of shapes, but two things they have in common are the way in which they work and the materials that are used for their construction – braided flexible plant fibres. Such a trap is placed at the bottom of calm water reservoirs and then covered with plants. The hopperless mouth should then be clogged. It is opened to remove fish when the catch has finished.

Bow
Indonesia, Papua, Baliem, ca. 2016
palm wood, rattan
donated by Jan Cieplak
MAP 21051

Fowling and fishing arrow
Indonesia, Papua, Baliem, 2017
wood, bamboo, rattan
donated by Jan Cieplak
MAP 21052

A bow and a branching arrow are fishing tools and are still in use in Papua today. Such tools are usually used by men. Standing on a long, narrow boat, floating in a shallow, calm water reservoir, a man shoots at fish, sometimes from a distance of up to 7 m, and then, pushing the boat forward with a bow or a pole, he comes closer and takes the arrow with a fish out of the water.

Fishhook
Solomon Islands, before 1914
tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, string, plastic
donated by Mirosława Rinder
and Jacek Wieczorek
MAP 15931

Fisherman – embroidery pattern
China, 2nd half of the 20th c.
paper, cutout
MAP 13588

Crab harvest
S. Djuprijany
Indonesia, Java, 1965
oil on canvas
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 2195

As a coastal city, Vũng Tàu can boast of a deep-rooted culture related to fishing. As in other provinces of the southern coast of Vietnam, also here the local fishermen traditionally worship large species of fish and marine mammals, especially whales. Numerous festivals dedicated to these animals, as well as the sandy beaches of Vũng Tàu have also turned the city into an attractive tourist destination today.
Vietnam, the 1970s

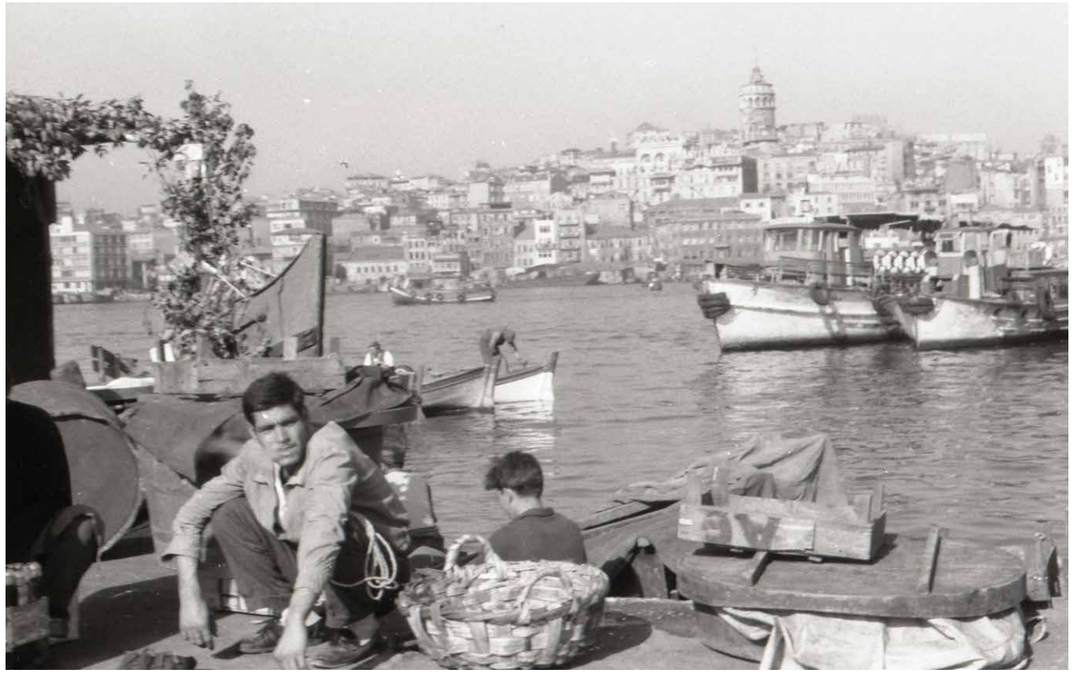
Photo by Janusz Eysymont, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 11/593

“Break in Fry Fishing” is the title given to the photograph by its author. Men standing in shallow water are holding nets on long wooden poles – they are using them to catch fry. Most probably, the fish will be used to stock rivers or ponds for breeding purposes.

Indonesia, 1970
Photo by Janusz Polanowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 97/357

Dong Hu Lake is the second largest urban lake in China. Its name – which translates as East Lake – refers to its location in the eastern part of the city of Wuhan. The vicinity of the lake is not only attractive for its beautiful views but for years, the lake has also served as a fishing spot attended by local fishermen. Its north-west coast has been particularly important. Its numerous small bays are inhabited by various species of fish, mainly carp.

China, ca. 1960
Photo by Adam Tabor, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 23/94



Views of fishermen fishing on the Bosphorus and fishing boats are an integral part of Istanbul's landscape and almost a symbol of the city. To this day, the districts of Karaköy and Eminönü, located by the Golden Horn Bay, bustle with many fish markets and local restaurants serving freshly caught fish and traditional dishes such as *balık ekmek* (fish in a bun), which are an important part of the city's culinary culture.

Turkey, the 1960s – the 1970s
Photo by Monika Warneńska, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP/86/1102

Night fishing, known in Japan as *ukai*, is based on using torches to lure fish. Sailing on boats, fishermen catch animals with nets or spears. This traditional method also employs cormorants that are trained to catch fish.

Japan, the 1920s – the 1940s
Photo by an unknown author, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 120/24

Chinese fishing nets – a type of passive net, common in South Asia and Indonesia. They are especially popular in the city of Kochin in the Indian state of Kerala, where people still use them today. The nets are spread on wooden structures lowered into the water with the use of a system of ropes and ledgers.

Bangladesh, ca. 1980
Photo by Jerzy Chociłowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 14/2285

TRANSPORT

Water transport plays an essential role in commuting between towns and regions located along coasts and major rivers. As early as 5000 BCE, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia sailed in their reed boats on the waters of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Similar boat models were also known in the Indus Valley and in ancient China.

In addition to transport purposes, boats were also used during holidays and celebrations, for example the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. One of its traditions is a race of boats in the shape of dragons.

The exhibition presents boat models from different regions of Asia. Their construction materials surely deserve special attention – some of them were made of dried cloves, silver or tortoiseshell. Although the showcased models had a decorative function, they reflect the diversity in the construction of boats, adjusted to the needs of local people.

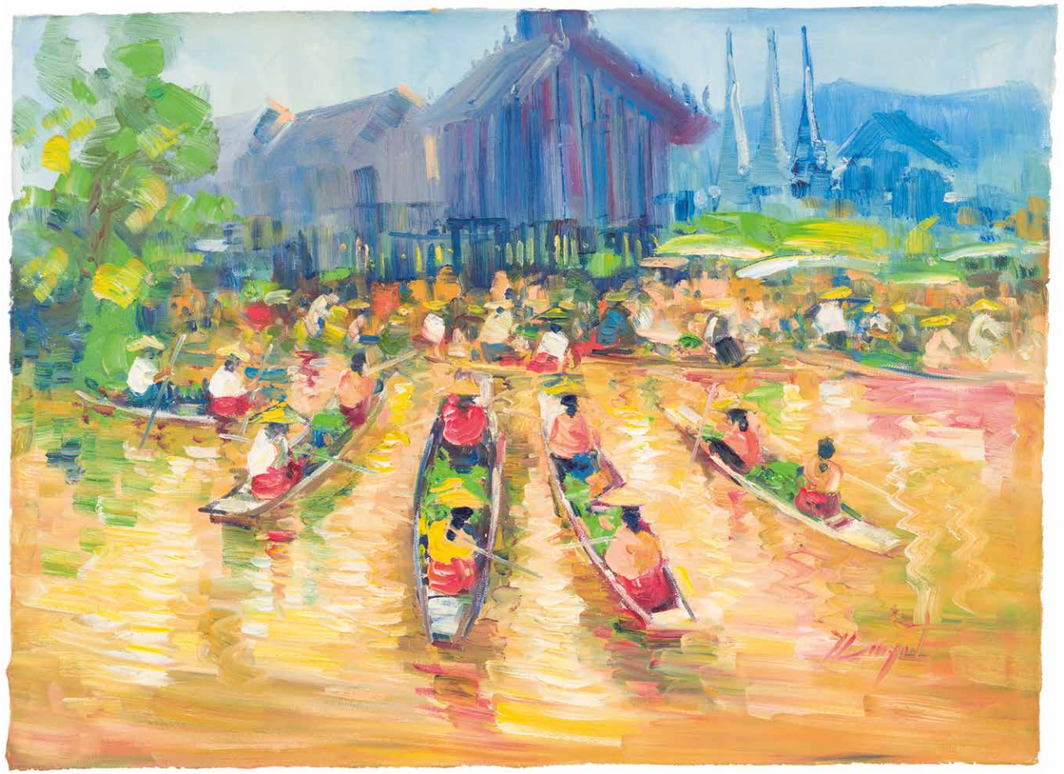
Model of a *dhoni*-type sailboat with oars
Maldives, Ihuru, before 1985
polychromed wood, synthetic fabric
126 × 109 × 29 cm
donated by Barbara Buczek-Płachtowa
MAP 8874

Model of a sailing ship
Workshop of Minggus and Brothers
Indonesia, the Moluku Islands, Ambon,
3rd quarter of the 20th c.
cloves, wood, copper, brass
49 × 58 × 11,3 cm
MAP 3563

Models of ships made of cloves began to be produced in the colonial era when European expeditions for spices began to reach the islands of today's eastern Indonesia. One of the most sought-after goods at the time were cloves, which were used in medicine and as a food spice. It was then, in the 18th century, that cloves began to be strung on wire constructions and models of ships were created from them. Such models became one of the first souvenirs brought by Europeans from their overseas expeditions.
The shape of the ship probably refers to the sailing ships of the Dutch East India Company that were used to transport goods.

Model of a *Jessore*-type boat
Bangladesh, 4th quarter of the 20th c.
rattan, wood
25 × 82 × 17 cm
donated by Nazema A. Choudhury
MAP 15544

In Bangladesh, located in the Ganges Delta, boats constitute the main means of transport. The relatively small country is crisscrossed by over 450 rivers and many oxbow lakes, often of extensive areas. During the monsoon, when the rivers overflow, boats become practically the only way to move around. Rivers are also a crucial source of food, which is why Bangladeshi cuisine is rich in fish dishes. The most popular type of boat in Bangladesh is a *sampan* boat. The word comes from the Chinese language, and it is likely that the model originated in China and then spread across other regions of Asia. In Bangladesh, there are many local types of *sampan* boats. The showcased type was developed in the region of Jessore, and this is where its name stems from. Its characteristic feature is an arch-shaped shelter called *ćhoi*, which serves as a protection of goods against rain and sun. Such boats are often used as houseboats – then the *ćhoi* is higher.



Floating market
U Ye Myint
Myanmar (Burma), 2nd half of the 20th c.
oil on canvas
55 × 75 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 20226

In the past, floating markets and selling goods directly from boats were commonplace in Southeast Asia, as well as in the whole Indian subcontinent. At times, rivers served as the only transport network, e.g., in the jungle. That is why human settlements were built on their banks. Nowadays, with the development of road and rail networks, water markets have lost their importance, but they still exist as a tourist attraction.

Model of a European sailing ship (frigate)
Indonesia, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
silver, filigree
8 × 11 × 2 cm
MAP 3501

Model of a fishing boat
Malaysia, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
polychromed wood
15,5 × 44,5 × 17,3 cm
donated by the Embassy of the Polish People's Republic in Kuala Lumpur
MAP 4619

Model of a "Chinese flower boat"
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
silver, wood, cloisonné, filigree, granulation, gilding
31 × 26 × 13 cm
MAP 16376

Model of a sailboat with a yuloh-type sculling oar
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
silver, wood
10 × 12,7 × 4 cm
MAP 16350

Vegetable seller on a boat
A. Muang
Thailand, Kanchanaburi, 4th quarter of the 20th c.
watercolour on leather, cutout
48,5 × 35,5 cm
MAP 16541

Album with the series "The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō" – water crossing
Ando Hiroshige (Artist), Sanoya Kihee (Publisher)
Japan, Honshu, Tokyo, 1840
colour woodcut on handmade paper
donated by Jerzy Kozakiewicz
MAP 10011/1–56

Model of a *junk*-type ship
Vietnam, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
wood, cotton canvas
28 × 28 × 7 cm
donated by Zbigniew Węglarz
MAP 5123

The fan-shaped sails of *junk* ships are inextricably linked to the marine landscape of southern China and Vietnam.
These relatively small ships, at first used mainly for fishing and river transport, have significantly evolved in terms of their construction and began to be used for long-distance ocean expeditions. Despite the seemingly simple construction, junk ships are true masterpieces of engineering. Their flat-bottomed hulls allow them to move efficiently in shallow waters, while the modular bulkhead design provides high displacement and allows them to continue sailing even when one of the hull sections is damaged.
The use of a counterbalanced rudder makes precise manoeuvring much easier, and the fan-shaped sails, flexible and easy to operate, can be quickly retracted, which appeared extremely practical during changing weather conditions.[6] Exactly these innovative technical solutions made *junks* extremely popular.
The boats have been extensively used not only in the fields like trade and transport, but also in warfare.

6 Starszy Pirat Patryk, "Dżonka Chińska – dalekowschodni statek czy może rupieć," in: Żagle, 2.10.2023, https://zagle.org/statki-dzonka-chinska/ (access: 1.09.2025).

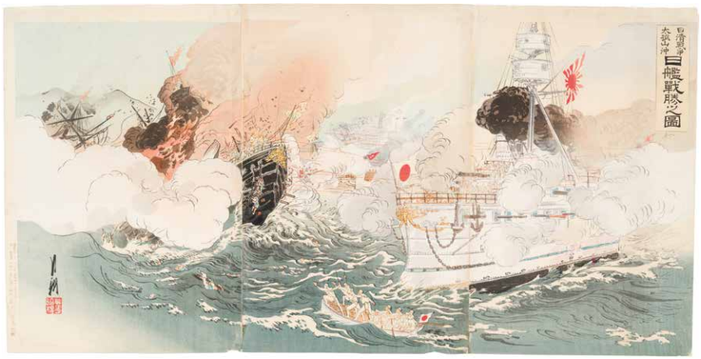
Model of a Royal Barge
Thailand, 2018
polychromed wood, glass, synthetic fabric
36 × 128 × 19 cm
donated by the Royal Thai Embassy in Warsaw
MAP 21685

The kings of Thailand adopt the name Rāma – the incarnation of the Lord Viṣ̄u, who is considered the perfect ruler – due to the common belief that the monarch himself is the incarnation of this god. Therefore, in iconography, the royal barges used for ceremonies depict Lord Viṣ̄u[7], and the annual procession on the river in the country's capital – Bangkok – is one of the most important national festivals. Other elements of this centuries-old tradition are music and songs.
The over 46-metre-long barge has the shape of a royal goose. It is painted gold, decorated with lacquer and pieces of glass, and its bow has a tassel made of yak bristles, imported especially for this purpose from Nepal. Its crew consists of 66 people, including a singer and a banner troop. In the centre of it, there is a pavilion with a throne for the king.
The entire fleet consists of 52 ships.[8]
The function of the barge procession is to strengthen and legitimise the royal power, to show its splendour and divine origin.
The rich symbolism that accompanies these celebrations emphasises the continuity of the kings' lineage and its origin from the ancient kingdom of Ayutthaya.[9]

7 Ch. Tingsanchali, "Royal Barge Procession in Thailand," in: *The South East Asian Review*, 2020/2021, vol. 45/46, pp. 119–129.

8 "The Royal Barge Procession," in: *Bangkok Post*, https://www.bangkokpost.com/specials/royal-barge-procession/2019/ (access: 31.07.2025).

9 Michael Hurley, *Waterways of Bangkok: Memory and Landscape*, doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2015, p. 101.



The naval battle
Ogata Gekko (Artist), Takekawa Risaburo (Publisher)
Japan, ca. 1894–1900
colour woodcut on paper
37 × 73 cm
MAP 10559

Model of a *junk*-type ship
Vietnam, 2nd half of the 20th c.
horn, tortoiseshell, wood
16,5 × 16 × 6 cm
donated by Edward Obertyński
MAP 12477

Model of a dragon boat
Vietnam, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
wood
13 × 21 × 5 cm
donated by Jerzy Wesołowski
MAP 12281

Model of a dragon boat
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
silver, wood, gilding, engraving
13,5 × 23 × 7,5 cm
MAP 16346

Model of a *sampan*-type boat
Vietnam, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
bamboo, plant fibre
9,8 × 20,3 × 5,9 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 20623

Dragon Boat Festival
China, 2nd half of the 20th c.
embroidery on silk with threads with gilded paper braiding
40 × 60 cm
MAP 22296

The Dragon Boat Festival (*Duānwǔ jié*) is one of the four most important Chinese holidays. It is a movable holiday, falling on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, which usually corresponds with June. According to tradition, the holiday is associated with the poet and politician Qu Yuan, who threw himself into the Miluo River in 278 BCE in protest against the corrupt government. The legend states that local fishermen raced out on their boats to save him.

That event became the genesis of modern dragon boat racing. The boats participating in the race have a characteristic, long and narrow structure, and their bows are decorated with carved dragon heads. They are operated by a dozen or even several dozen rowers who row to the rhythm of the drum and under the guidance of a navigator who also remains on board. These races constitute not only a spectacular part of the celebrations but also symbolise the power of community and function as a tribute paid to the tradition.

In some regions of Asia, boats are the most convenient and fastest means of transport, and rivers bustle with life. Women on boats meet in the morning to sell or buy goods, primarily fruits and vegetables, but also spices and fish.

Indonesia, Kalimantan, 2013
Photo by Paulina Matuszewska, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 51/1

The photograph depicts a vegetable market on Dal Lake, around which – criss-crossed by numerous canals – stretches the city of Srinagar. This makes boats an important means of transport for people and goods there. They also serve as a tourist attraction. In recent years, however, the increasing water pollution and climate change have resulted in drying up the lake, and this has affected the popularity of the market – fewer and fewer people are visiting it these days.

India, Kashmir, Srinagar, the 1970s
Photo by Jerzy Chociłowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 14/2358

In some regions of Asia, boats are the most convenient and fastest means of transport, and rivers bustle with life. Women on boats meet in the morning to sell or buy goods, primarily fruits and vegetables, but also spices and fish.

Indonesia, Kalimantan, 2013
Photo by Paulina Matuszewska, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 51/1

WATER VESSELS

Although drinking water is the most basic activity, many cultures have granted it a remarkable character by creating sophisticated vessels for this very purpose. The use of precious materials and imaginative shapes turned thirst-quenching into an elegant ritual. Some types of vessels were intended only for drinking water, and their forms differ from jugs dedicated to washing water.

Clay vessels were often used to store water since their natural porous structure allowed moisture to soak outside, and this resulted in cooling the content. On the other hand, waterskins and gourd bottles, used to transport water during journeys, usually took simple forms and were made of shatterproof materials, such as leather or metal.

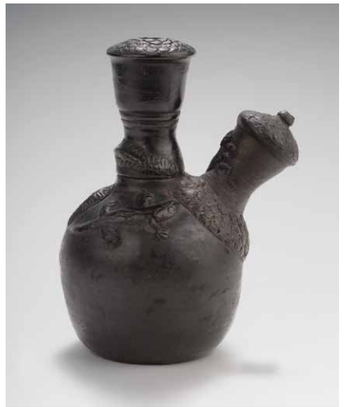
Nowadays, while choosing a disposable plastic bottle for similar purposes, we should remember that its decomposition will take as much time as approximately one thousand years!

Gourd water vessel
Indonesia, Papua, Baliem, 2nd half of the 20th c.
gourd, wood, plant fibre, cassowary feathers
31 × 10 × 10 cm
MAP 19183

The gourd water vessel comes from Papua – a province of Indonesia located on the island of New Guinea. It was made with the use of locally available materials, such as a gourd (a pumpkin-like plant with fruit that – after hollowing and drying – can serve as containers), plant fibre and feathers of cassowary – a flightless bird that only inhabits this island and the north-eastern regions of Australia. The plant fibre support is well-thought-out and constructed in a way that makes it possible to put the vessel in the upright position or to tie it and easily carry it during a journey.

Waterskin
Afghanistan, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
leather, cotton fabric, wood, embroidery
42 × 27 × 18 cm
MAP 13787

Kendi vessel
Japan, Kyushu, Arita, 17th–18th c.
cobalt underglaze painted porcelain
22,5 × 18 × 15 cm
MAP 14600

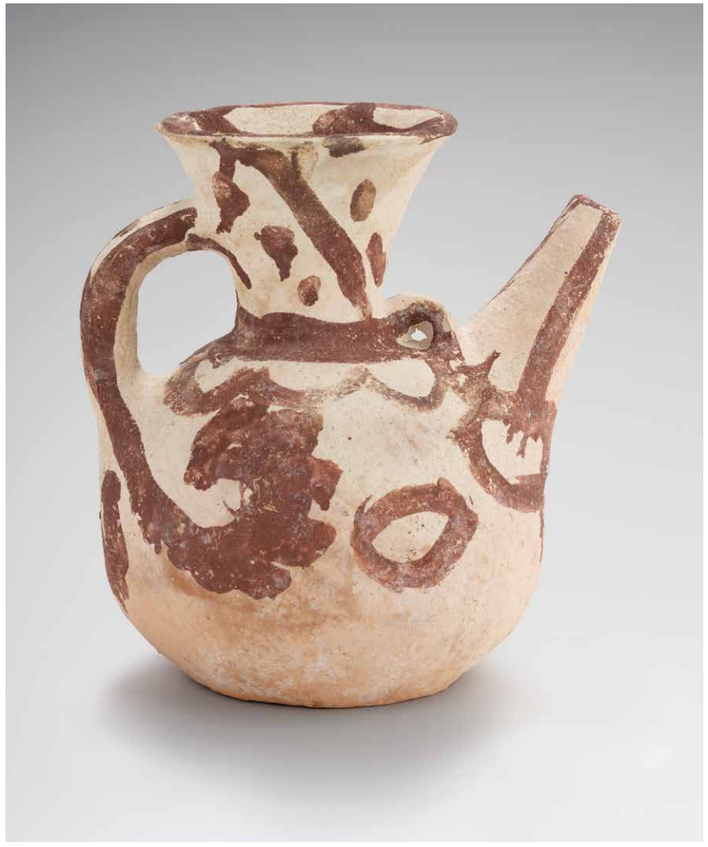


Kendi vessel
Indonesia, Kalimantan, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
wheel throwing, manual forming clay
25,5 × 15,1 × 18,5 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 2588

Kendi vessel
China, Indonesia (fittings), 18th–19th c.
cobalt underglaze painted porcelain, silver, repoussé, engraving
28 × 18,7 × 12,4 cm
MAP 14725

The vessel consists of a bulbous body, a neck used to hold and fill the *kendi*, and a spout through which water is poured into the mouth without the necessity to touch its surface. Its name most probably comes from the Sanskrit word *kuṇḍa*, describing a water vessel, but of a different shape than the *kendi*, which originates in Southeast Asia. *Kendi* vessels were produced in the territory of today's Indonesia as early as the 8th century. Between the 14th and 19th centuries, they were made mainly in China and then exported to Southeast Asia. Although the shapes of the vessels changed over the years, their essential elements and function remained unchanged. They were often decorated with cobalt underglaze paintings against a white background, which was commonly associated with China. Silver fittings were added later, already in Java or Bali. They ceased to be imported from China in the 19th century. Nevertheless, *kendi* vessels are still produced locally, as well as they remain in use.[10]

10 Michael Sullivan, "Kendi," in: *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 1957, vol. 11, pp. 40–58.



Oftoba jug
Xikayat Latipova
Tajikistan, the 1980s
modelled, slip-painted, polychromed clay
24 × 23 × 19 cm
MAP 12621

Vessels commonly used in Central Asia for storing water and dairy products have been traditionally made of clay. Clay vessels, such as water jugs, are known for their cooling properties; they also keep water and other liquid products fresh.
In rural and nomadic communities, including those inhabiting the remote mountainous regions of the Pamir Mountains, clay vessels – for household use or for sale – were produced exclusively by women. In the 2nd half of the 20th century, in the villages of the Pamir Mountains, the process of making such dishes, which involved wedging red clay, forming it into objects, wheel-throwing to smooth the surfaces, painting and firing, was still accompanied by special songs and rituals related to the symbolism of fertility. At the culminating moment, and thus at the firing stage, which was treated as the "birth of the vessel," men were even banned from the room.
Modelled pottery from this region is characteristic of the consistency of its forms and decorations – wide, irregular lines and abstract patterns kept in shades of brown and painted with a thick stick with natural dyes.

Duck-shaped vessel – *urdak*
Ismailjan Kamilov
Uzbekistan, Fergana Valley, Rishton, 2020
modelle, slip-painted, underglaze painted clay
13,6 × 18,1 × 9,1 cm
MAP 22281

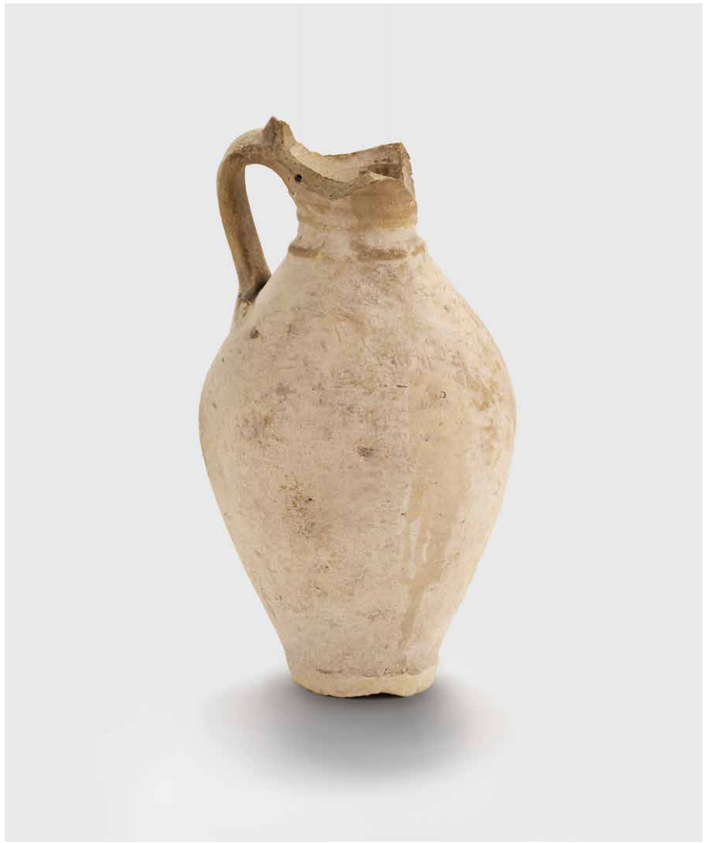
A duck-shaped clay vessel is a characteristic piece of pottery used as a water jug or wine jug, both in everyday life and on special occasions, in Uzbekistan, but also in the region of the Ferghana Valley, inhabited by Uzbeks and Tajiks.
In Uzbek, the vessel is called *urdak* which means "duck," while in Tajik it is referred to as *obdasta* – from *ob*, which means "water," and dasta, which translates as a "hand".[11] Such *vessels* are still made today, mainly in Rishton, in the workshops of *kuzagars* – potters specialising in the production of hollow kitchenware, who form separately each part of the *urdak*, such as the body, a handle, and a lip. The Rishton *urdak* vessels are characterised by an intense blue colour, obtained thanks to the use of traditional ishkor glaze, made from the ashes of desert plants rich in potassium. Duck-shaped vessels refer to the forms applied in the production of metal water vessels in the shape of birds or other animals, popularised by Islamic art. Ewers or jugs in the shape of various animals, known in Europe as aquamaniles (from Latin: *aqua* – water, *manus* – hand), were also used in the Middle Ages and were used for ritual purposes, such as washing hands in church.[12]

11 Elmira Gyul, *Art Encyclopedia: Terms related to the traditional art of Uzbekistan*, Tashkent, 2023, p. 244.

12 Elmira Gyul, "Rishtan 'ducks' – utility, magic and beauty," in: *Rishtan ceramics*, Tashkent, 2021, p. 229.

Tañpha jug
Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, Thimi, 1978
wheel throwing, manual forming clay
25 × 17 × 19 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 5482

Ghagri jug
Nepal, Kathmandu Valley, Thimi, 1978
wheel throwing, manual forming,
engraving clay
35 × 35 × 35 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 5483



Jug
Iraq, ca. 500 BCE
wheel throwing clay
24,5 × 14 × 14 cm
donated by Józef Osek
MAP 17363

The cities of Thimi and Bhadgaon (Bhaktapur) in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal are famous for their ceramic and clay pottery. It has been produced only by Newar Hindu people from the Prajapati caste. Archaeological research in the region has proven that this craft has been functioning there for centuries. A large concentration of pottery workshops in a relatively small area – there were 1000 of them in the 1970s – resulted in the greatest variety of forms and ornaments on the Indian subcontinent.
The soil surrounding both cities is rich in high-quality grey and black clay. The excavated clay is seasoned for a year and then kneaded by hand. Vessels made of it are used to store liquid and solid products, including water, and their capacity ranges from 12 to 80 litres. To reduce their porosity and permeability, as well as to increase their durability, they are fired twice and then polished.[13] Water stored in such jugs stays fresh for a long time and maintains a low temperature.

13 Judy Birmingham, "Traditional Potters of the Kathmandu Valley: An Ethnoarchaeological Study," in: *Man*, 1975, vol. 10(3), pp. 370–386.

ACCESS TO WATER AS A HUMAN RIGHT

According to UN estimates, by 2050, over half of the world's population will be at risk of drinking water deficits. This increasingly urgent problem stems from, among others, climate change, population growth and industrial development. At present, it already affects China and countries in Central Asia; however, the most vivid example of a state struggling with these obstacles is India. The main problems constitute the depletion of groundwater and the pollution of surface water. Yet another is the drying up of ponds and lakes.

The images of women carrying jugs with water are not merely idyllic scenes from the past that often served as an inspiration for artists. In many regions, this is everyday life. The lack of access to water is a social problem that leads to grave inequalities – women who are engaged in collecting water for their households have no time for education or paid employment. Therefore, providing drinking water for all people still remains one of the most urgent challenges of the modern world.

Ring used for carrying vessels
on the head – *idoni*
India, Rajasthan, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
cotton fabric, cypraeidae (cowries)
2,5 × 13,5 × 13,5 cm
donated by Krishna Kumar Jajodia
MAP 8037

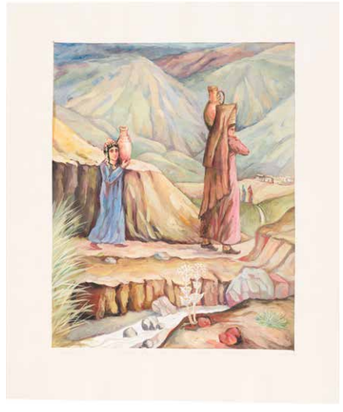
One of the household duties performed entirely by women was – and at times still is – to carry water from a well or pond to a house. *Idoni* is a ring made of a rolled piece of cotton fabric. It was put on the top of one's head, and a jug with water was placed on it; this made the process of carrying water on the head more convenient. Today, *idoni* serves as a support for smaller water vessels used during festivals and rites.
The images of women drawing water from wells or carrying jugs on their heads have become idyllic representations of Rajasthan – a desert state in north-western India. Part of such expeditions for water was singing songs, also called *idoni*, telling funny or sad stories associated with this responsibility.[14]
Such images, popularised in modern times by miniature painters, can still be found in contemporary arts, including Bollywood cinema.
Other popular stories and images were those in which women offered water to warriors tired after a long journey, as well as those describing or depicting ambushes on girls by the well. This romanticised motif has justified the factual violence of men against women.

14 Bhoomika Dwivedi, "Classical Music in the Rajasthani Folk Tradition: The *Langa–Manganiar* Music," in: *IIS University Journal of Arts*, 2022, vol. 10(3), p. 437.

Woman with a jug
India, before 1984
arcosic sandstone
40 × 13,5 × 7,5 cm
MAP 7671

Woman with a jug
Palestine, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
dense limestone
16,5 × 3,9 × 2,6 cm
donated by Brygitta and Wawrzyniec Węclewiczowie
MAP 6666

Women by the well
India, Rajasthan, 20th/21st c.
oil on wood
30,5 × 91,5cm
donated by Maciej Góralski



Mountain spring
Meret Klychev
Turkmenistan, 1997
gouache on paper
44 × 35 cm
MAP 15607

On most Indonesian islands, access to drinking water is rather common. However, there are some exceptions, and Palue Island is one of them. There are no sources of drinking water on the island and therefore it has to be obtained either from rain or in the process of distillation of geothermal steam. Obtaining water, also drawing it from wells, is most often a responsibility of women. Girls – in some regions also today – are trained for this role from their early childhood.

Indonesia, 1970
Photo by Janusz Polanowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 97/3092

Also in cities, access to running water inside households could be limited. That is why local authorities provided the communities with municipal wells. Most often, supplying the household with water was – and in some regions still is – the duty of women who, apart from doing the chores, were also responsible for taking care of the children. And hence the sight of groups of toddlers playing nearby.

Nepal, Kathmandu, 1978
Photo by Andrzej Wawrzyniak, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 1/4330

In the photograph taken in the 1970s, we can see women carrying metal and clay jugs on their heads. Today, it is less common for women to carry water as more and more people have it at home. Such images, however, can still be encountered. Water is transported and stored in plastic containers of the same shapes and decorations, but most often produced in bright colours.

India, Rajasthan, the 1970s
Photo by Jerzy Chociłowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 14/2651

RICE FIELDS

Rice, just after wheat, is the second most commonly grown cereal in the world. Its grains constitute the basis of Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Vietnamese or Japanese cuisine. The plant grows in water, and its cultivation on fields located on human-made terraces or in river deltas has shaped landscapes for centuries, at the same time inspiring great numbers of artists. Contemporarily, mass rice cultivation requires not only intensive irrigation but also fertilisation, as a result of which harmful substances enter soils and rivers. Moreover, the cultivation cycle of this grain strongly depends on the arrival of the monsoon, and this determines not only the time of working in the field but also the rhythm of life for millions of people around the world. As a consequence, rice is also of great cultural importance. In several places, its harvest becomes a time of elaborate celebrations.

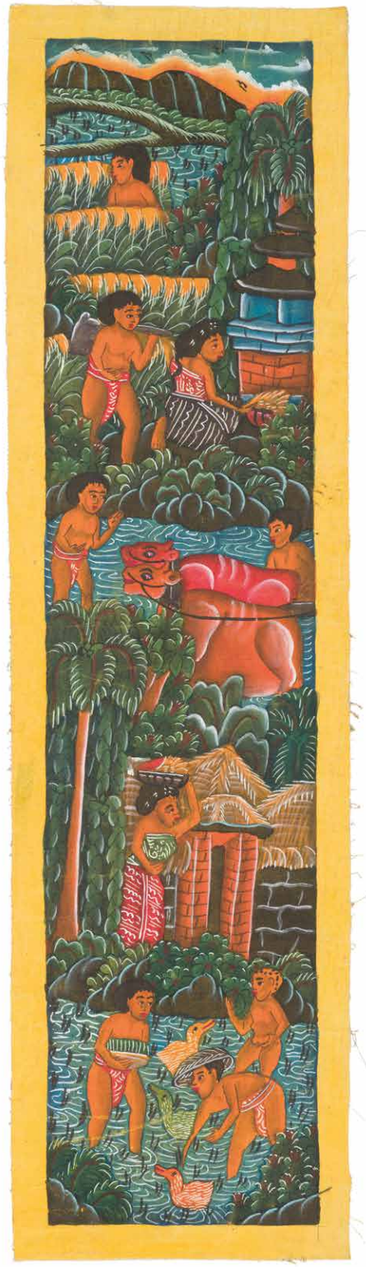
Planting rice
Hoang Tich Chu
Vietnam, 1985
lacquer on wood 60 × 80 cm
MAP 10194

“Rice planting season VII”
Yap Hian Tjay
Indonesia, 2000
watercolours on paper
57 × 76 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 17574

Rice fields
Thanh Le
Vietnam, 2nd half of the 20th c.
lacquer on wood, gilding
60 × 123 cm
MAP 18594

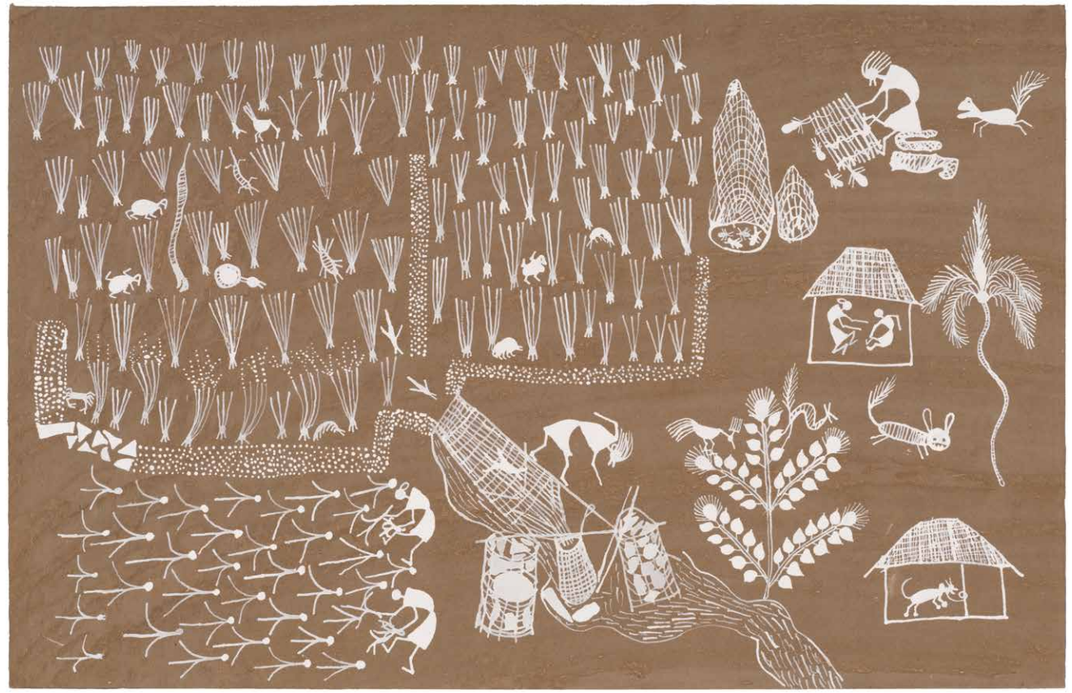
The painting, signed with the name of the artist Thanh Le, is an example of traditional Vietnamese painting created with the use of the lacquer technique on a wooden base. It depicts four figures bent over a water-flooded field, planting rice at dusk, in the light of the setting sun. Despite its simplicity, the composition accurately addresses the effort of everyday work and the hardship associated with rice cultivation – one of the most important cereals in Asia, which also constitutes a vital part of Vietnam's economy and culture.

Traditional rice cultivation is performed on water-flooded fields, often turned into terraces on the slopes of the hills; this allows even uneven terrain to be used for this purpose. The cultivation process includes sowing seeds in nurseries, transplanting young saplings into rice paddies and draining them before harvest.



Rice cultivation in a Balinese village
Indonesia, Bali, the 1980s
watercolours on canvas
84 × 22,5 cm
donated by Monika and Mieczysław Strzechowscy
MAP 21954

Model of an irrigation device
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
silver, forging
10,2 × 12,5 × 12,7 cm
MAP 16339



Rice fields
Jivya Soma Mashe
India, Maharashtra, Thane, Warli, the 1980s
watercolours on paper
29,3 × 45,5 cm
donated by A.K. Misra
MAP 11551

This irrigation device, also widespread in Vietnam, originates from ancient China. It allows water to be transferred from the lower channels to the higher terraces with rice paddies. The device was usually operated by one to four people. Nowadays, water is distributed through canals in Vietnam, but recurring droughts make them dry out and, as a result, saltwater from the sea penetrates into the soil, exposing the crops to a serious threat.

Vietnam, the 1960s / the 1970s
Photo by Monika Warneńska, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 86/727

In many places, rice planting is still done manually. Rice saplings are prepared in advance in a nursery, then tied in bunches and transferred to the water-flooded paddies. There they are planted with regular spaces between them, which allows them to grow properly.
China, 1960

Photo by Adam Tabor, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 23/272

Terraced rice fields enable rice cultivation also on the mountain slopes. The small plots separated by embankments are irrigated with the use of a complex irrigation system, which requires the collaboration of the local communities and significantly influences the relations between their members.

Indonesia, the 1970s
Photo by Alina and Jerzy Markiewiczowie, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 106/272

RAIN

In many communities, the rainy season determines the life cycle. The southern and eastern regions of Asia depend on the monsoon – the wind that brings heavy rainfalls in the summer. However, in the desert regions, such as those located in Southwest Asia, rain is scarce. For these reasons, many communities have their own rituals associated with the specifics of the region. They include summoning or driving away rain and are sometimes performed with the use of musical instruments.

Unfortunately, climate change disrupts the cycle of nature nowadays. In India, increasingly unpredictable monsoons result in alternating floods and droughts. In 2021, Henan province in China faced the heaviest rainfall in a thousand years. Heavy rains also pose a great challenge to urban infrastructure in desert regions – the flood in Dubai in 2021 might serve as an example here.

Rain cover called *ilit*
Indonesia, Papua, Tingilimo, 2001
banana leaf (?), plant fibre
105 × 45 cm
MAP 19198

The Asmat people, who live on the southwest coast of New Guinea, are known for their skilful use of natural resources in their daily lives. In their culture, it is common to construct makeshift rain covers from large leaves, such as palm or banana leaves. These natural "umbrellas" are easy to produce and effectively protect against rainfall in the tropical climate of the region.

Dong son-type drum
Myanmar (Burma), ca. 1950
bronze sheet
51 × 63 × 63 cm
donated by Andrzej Pacek and Marek Stańczyk
MAP 20555

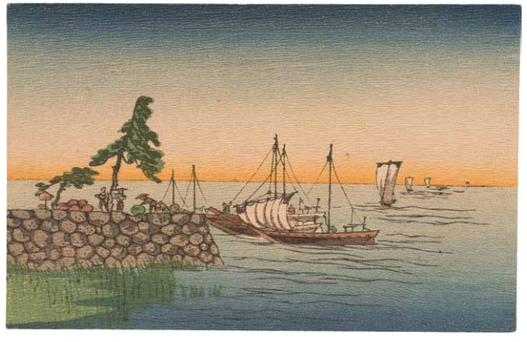
This instrument is commonly known as *the dong son drum*. The first part of its name refers to the Dong Son culture, which developed, among others, in the area of today's Vietnam from the 8th to the 2nd century BCE. Its representatives were the first to produce this kind of musical instrument. The second part is related to the appearance of the instrument and the way it is played, both analogous to drums.

According to the musicological classification, this instrument is a gong, as it is made entirely of metal, while the drums have a leather membrane.
In Southeast Asia, bronze drums were used as musical instruments, but above all, they had a cult function and were a sign of their owner's wealth. What draws attention in the case of such objects are ornaments, among which representations interpreted as frogs stand out. They are usually placed symmetrically in four spots of the soundboard and occur as a single figurine or several ones arranged in layers. Scholars suspect that they symbolise rain, and this makes them associate playing such drums with rain-calling rituals.

"Sawan month" (monsoon season in India)
Hardev Singh
Canada, 1985
lithography on paper
42,5 × 30,5 cm
donated by the Artist
MAP 8989

Rain
Phung Pham
North Vietnam, the 1970s/the 1980s
woodcut on paper
29 × 29 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 10871

Coast in the rain
Japan, 1st half of the 20th c.
colour woodcut on cardboard
9 × 14 cm
MAP 13246



Boats at the waterfront
Japan, 1st half of the 20th c.
colour woodcut on cardboard
9 × 14 cm
MAP 13251

Estuary at dawn
Japan, 1st half of the 20th c.
colour woodcut on cardboard
9 × 14 cm
MAP 13247

Khushtak whistle
Karimova
Tajikistan, the 1980s
modelled, polychromed clay
18,5 × 9,5 × 5,5 cm
MAP 11887

Modelled from a single piece of clay and painted figurines in the shape of fantastic animals that serve as whistles called *khushtak* are among the popular examples of folk art in Central Asia. Khushtaks are both children's toys and instruments of magical meaning. They originate in the pre-Islamic Persian beliefs. According to tradition, the sound coming out of them during the spring equinox was supposed to bring rain and fertility.
In some regions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, *khushtaks* are still popular today. They are used during the celebrations of the Persian New Year – Nouruz and are believed to chase away winter and summon spring.

Dragon over the waves
China, 2nd half of the 20th c.
cut out of crêpe paper, aquarelle
19 × 13 cm
donated by Irena Sławińska
MAP 15264

The Chinese dragon *lóng* is one of the most valued and beloved mythological figures in Chinese culture. It symbolises mighty and auspicious powers, and first and foremost, control over water and weather. According to traditional beliefs, it sprinkles the earth with rain during droughts, ensuring fertility, abundant crops and prosperity. Unlike dragons in Western cultures, this Chinese dragon is not associated with aggression or danger.
On the contrary, it is an embodiment of harmony, good fortune and care for human beings.

At the same time, it is a symbol of imperial power and Chinese culture; the emperor himself was sometimes referred to as the "Son of the Dragon." The expression "descendants of the Dragon," on the other hand, is used by the Chinese as a manifestation of their ethnic identity – it refers to national pride and the continuity of tradition. Today, the dragon remains an essential element of Chinese art, rituals and symbolism.

WATER IN RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS AND BELIEFS

"Darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:2) – these words from the Book of Genesis refer to the symbolic meaning of water as an initial chaos from which the world was created. In many other religions and cultures, the origin of the world is also associated with water, and the Earth emerges from it, often due to the intervention of gods – as in the beliefs found in India, the islands of Polynesia or ancient Mesopotamia.

At the same time, water is present in many rituals – it can be used for spiritual purification and blessing, it is believed to have healing properties. It is also part of initiation ceremonies and funeral rites.

THE ELEMENT OF DUAL NATURE

In various beliefs, water has both positive and negative connotations. In many traditions, it is associated with the beginnings of life on Earth. In Hindu creation stories, the primordial waters that filled the entire universe symbolise both chaos and potency. One of the versions of the cosmogonic myth says that until the process of creation began, Lord Viṣṇu had been floating in the vast ocean, resting on the body of the great snake Ananta and indulging in blissful pleasure. Also, according to the legend of the creation of Papua New Guinea, at first, the world was an endless ocean. Then the ancestral crocodile carried the silt from the ocean depths on its back and brought it to the surface, forming the first land. When the sun rose, people and animals emerged from the crocodile's open mouth and inhabited the land on its back.

The mighty power of water often evoked fear. That is why many cultures, especially those of coastal regions, are rich in the figures of tutelary deities, gods and goddesses who are believed to protect sailors, fishermen or travellers. The Chinese goddess Mazu of a gentle physiognomy, usually depicted in noble robes and headgear, and the Indian Vahāṇavaṭī, often presented on a ship with deployed sails, can serve as such examples.

Goddess Vahāṇavaṭī – the patron of fishermen
Lal Lakshman Bhai
India, Gujarat, 1987
watercolours on cotton fabric, stamp printing
109 × 70 cm
donated by A.K. Misra
MAP 11632

Goddess Vahāṇavaṭī is depicted in a multi--masted sail ship, surrounded by aquatic creatures – fish and crocodiles. Primarily, she is the patron of the communities living on the coasts: sailors, merchants and others. She protects against storms and ship accidents.
Mātā nī paćheḍī is a painting genre developed by the *Vāgharī*, a nomadic tribe and caste of artists who move along the rivers of the state of Gujarat. Its members are followers of Śaktism – one of the three main denominations in Hinduism; here, in the centre of worship is *Śakti* (Goddess).
Mātā nī paćheḍī, or the "image of the Mother (Goddess)," served as a portable shrine for the lower castes. All paintings have a similar composition and colour scheme. They are painted with natural dyes, and then the canvases are soaked in rivers. This gives them a spiritual dimension, although it is also believed that such a process enhances colours. Damaged paintings are ritually thrown into rivers.

Goddess Mazu – the patron of fishermen
Taiwan, ca. 1950
polychromed wood
25 × 14 × 12,5 cm
MAP 21703

According to legends, Mazu was the daughter of a fisherman, gifted with the extraordinary ability to leave her body during sleep. One night, thanks to this ability, she managed to save her father and brothers during a violent storm. Unfortunately, she failed to save her youngest brother, and this motivated her to devote herself to caring for all fishermen and sailors exposed to dangers while sailing.

Mazu is mainly worshipped as the patron of fishermen and sailors, especially on the southern coast of China, Taiwan and Vietnam. The cult of the goddess has its origin in folk tradition; over time, it began to recognise Mazu as the divine guardian of the seas and oceans and associate her figure with protection and safety during sea journeys. She gained the status of a goddess, whose cult spread along with the migrations of the population living in the coastal regions of Southeast Asia.
One of the oldest temples dedicated to Mazu is located off the coast of present-day Macau. According to the legend, when Portuguese sailors first reached these coasts in the 16th century, they asked the local population about the name of the place. The latter pointed to the temple, saying "A-Ma-Gao" (which in Minnan meant "Mazu Bay" or the "Place of Mazu"). The Portuguese interpreted this as "Macau" and this is how the European name for this territory was coined.

"Mythology 2" - Before the world existed, all was filled with the primordial waters
Kalidas Karmakar
Bangladesh, 1978
etching and aquatint on handmade paper
21 × 35 cm
donated by the Artist
MAP 4397

In this artistic interpretation of the cosmogonic myth, Kalidas Karmakar symbolically invokes themes from various traditions of Hinduism. He refers to the myth of the creation of the world, which says that in the beginning, there was nothing but an endless ocean of primordial waters. Lord Viṣṇu floated on the surface of these waters, resting on the body of a large serpent, and a lotus sprouted from his navel with Lord Brahmā sitting upon it. Then the latter created the world.[15]
Another myth tells the story of a golden egg that emerged from primordial waters. Inside the egg, there was God Brahmā who split the egg open, and that is when it gave the sound of "Oṃ" and, having done so, began the process of creating the world.
In the print, we can see a lotus flower floating among the endless waters and the god sitting on it. In the corner, there is the syllable "Oṃ" – the first mantra, the first sound. The artist added a stanza in Sanskrit around the lotus flower along with the figure of a woman to remind us that it is Śakti, the feminine energy, that is the driving force and dynamic power of the universe; every god is accompanied by his wife, without whom no activity or intervention can even begin.[16]

15 Cornelia Dimmitt, Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 30–35.

16 *Ibidem*, pp. 221–226.

Matsya (the avatar of Lord Viṣṇu) fighting with demon Śaṅkha in ocean waters
India, Odisha, 4th quarter of the 20th c.
watercolours on cotton fabric
20,2 × 25,5 cm
MAP 14910

Lord Viṣnu is one of the three most important gods of Hinduism. He is responsible for sustaining the existence of the world. One of his unique features is that he has avatars – incarnations who were born specifically to fulfil different missions but always associated with preventing the destabilisation of the universe. His first incarnation is Matsya, which literally means "fish" in Sanskrit language. Matsya is often depicted as half-human, half-fish, with a body coming out of the open mouth of the fish. This incarnation appears in the Vedas – the oldest holy books of Hinduism. During the great flood, Matsya saved the first human – Manu, ordering him to build a boat beforehand. When the flood came, Matsya tied it to a horn on his head and led it safely through the waters flooding the earth.
The sacred texts include other stories, too. One of them is the defeat of demon Śaṅkha (Sanskrit: conch), the son of Sāgara (Sanskrit: ocean), depicted in the painting. The demon defeated all the gods, but they always retained their powers. After some time, he understood that it was possible, as it was the Vedas that were their source of power. Having learnt so, he stole the manuscript with the sacred texts. However, the Vedas managed to escape from his hands and hide themselves in the depths of the ocean. To bring them back, Lord Viṣnu took the form of Matsya and fought a victorious battle with demon Śaṅkha in the ocean waters.[17]

17 *The Skanda-Purā*, Part VI, Delhi, 1998, II.iv.13.24-55, pp. 125–127.

Kṛṣṇa lifting Mount Govardhana to protect shepherds from heavy rain
India, Odisha, Puri, the 1970s
watercolours on cotton fabric
30,5 × 46 cm
donated by Escorts Ltd, a company from Calcutta
MAP 6867

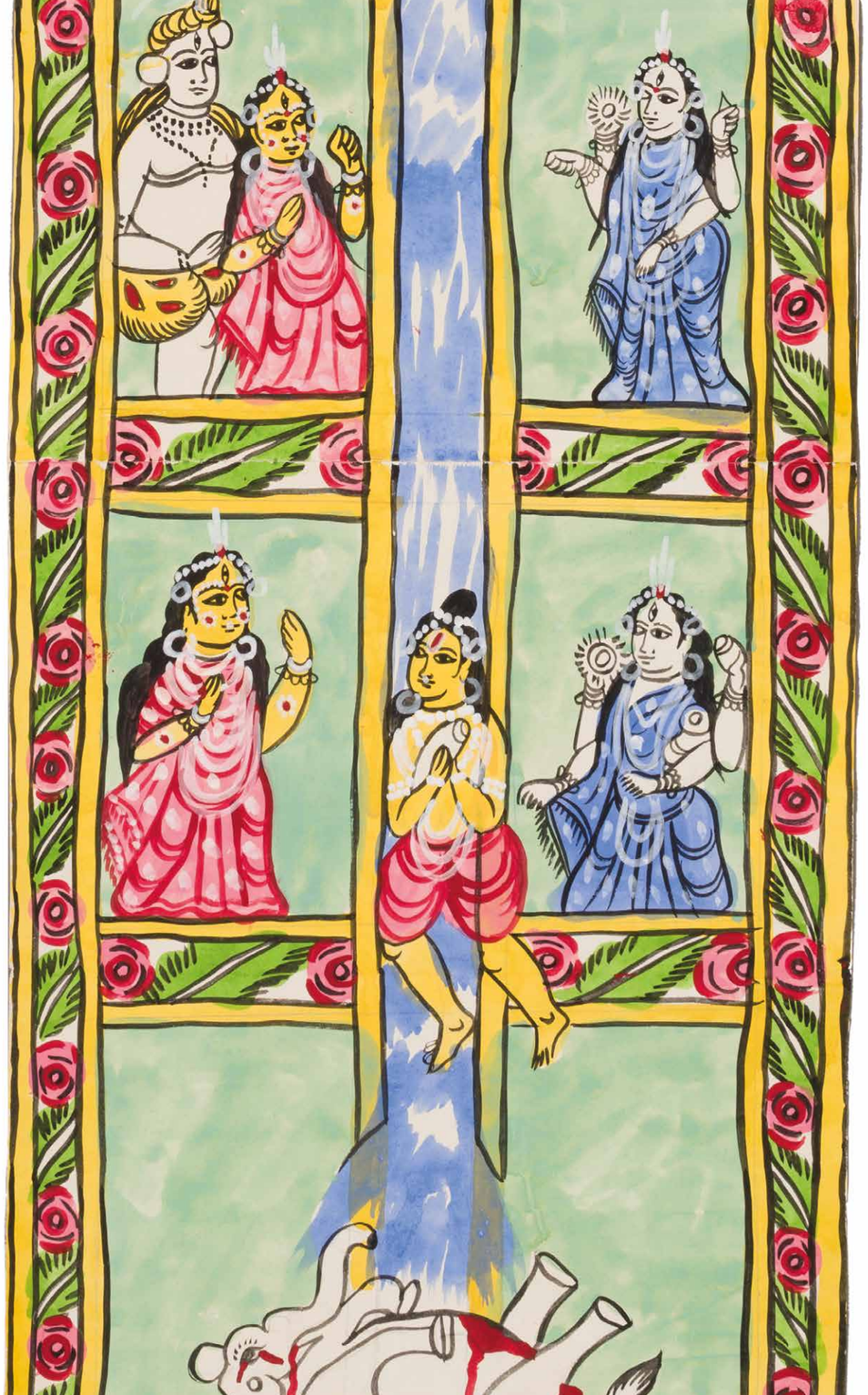
One of the earthly incarnations of the Lord Viṣnu is Kṛṣṇa. We learn about his adventures as a small boy living in a cowherd's village. During the day, he grazed cows, and in the evenings, played with other children on the riverbank. However, his mission was to defeat the evil king Kaṁsa, which he did when he grew up.
Kṛṣṇa's supernatural powers were revealed early in life.
The villagers made regular offerings to Indra – the god of rain – without whom agricultural efforts were doomed to failure. On one occasion, K□ṣ□a persuaded the cowherds to give the offerings dedicated to God Indra to Mount Govardhana instead. In this way, he wanted to prove to the villagers that all creation was a manifestation of the Absolute and therefore, it was necessary to move away from the worship of the old Vedic gods. This infuriated Indra, who sent a terrible storm with strong freezing wind, hail and heavy rainfall. In return, Kṛṣṇa lifted Mount Govardhana with one hand and all the cowherds along with their cattle took refuge under it. As soon as Indra and other deities who had been observing those events understood that Kṛṣṇa was the Supreme God, he decided to calm the storm.[18]
The story shows how important the natural monsoon cycle has been in everyday life in the region. Rain was a way of communication between the divine and human worlds – when people were good and pious, the gods sent life-giving rain. And when they failed to fulfil their religious duties, they were punished with destructive storms.

18 *The Bhāgavata Purā*, Part IV, Delhi, 2002, 24-25, pp. 1409–1420.

RITUAL PURIFICATION

In many religions, water symbolises spiritual purity and renewal. In Christianity, baptism washes away original sin. In Islam, ablution is an obligatory ritual before prayer that aims at removing physical and spiritual impurities. In Hinduism, three sacred rivers – the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Sarasvati (also considered goddesses: Gaṅgā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī) – serve as pilgrimage sites for ritual bathing.

At the beginning of 2025, during the Maha Kumbh Mela festival, 660 million believers immersed themselves in water at the confluence point of these three rivers to purify their souls. Interestingly enough, today, the Sarasvati River is entirely mythical – its waters dried up in prehistoric times.



Set of vessels used for washing the body before prayer in Islam

Dastshui bowl
B. Mavlanov
Tajikistan, Konibodom, 2001
wheel-thrown, slip-painted, underglaze painted clay
14,5 × 25,5 × 25,5 cm
MAP 12749

Oftoba jug
Uzbekistan, 1985
wheel-thrown, slip-painted, underglaze painted clay
25 × 10,6 × 11,5 cm
MAP 9360

In Islam, water plays a vital role in daily rituals. Before each prayer, Muslims are obliged to perform ablution that is to wash their bodies: face, hands and feet. Various types of dishes are used for this: water jugs and wide-rimmed bowls. In the past, they used to be made of metal and were often ornamented with engraved floral or geometric patterns. A special type of vessel used for ritual cleansing is a jug with a bulbous body and a slender spout, called *oftoba*. It is used in some regions of Central Asia, such as the Fergana Valley, but also near Bukhara, Shahrisabz and Qarshi.[19] Ablutions were also performed with the use of bowls or wash basins called *dastshui* (*dast* – "hand" and *shui*, from *shustan* – "to wash") in the Tajik language.20 They are unique due to their characteristic form: a round base and a perforated bowl with drain holes creating geometric patterns. These ceramic vessels from the Fergana Valley, although they come from two countries – Uzbekistan and Tajikistan – share some common features: the colour scheme (based on shades of green and blue combined with white) and the technique in which they are produced.

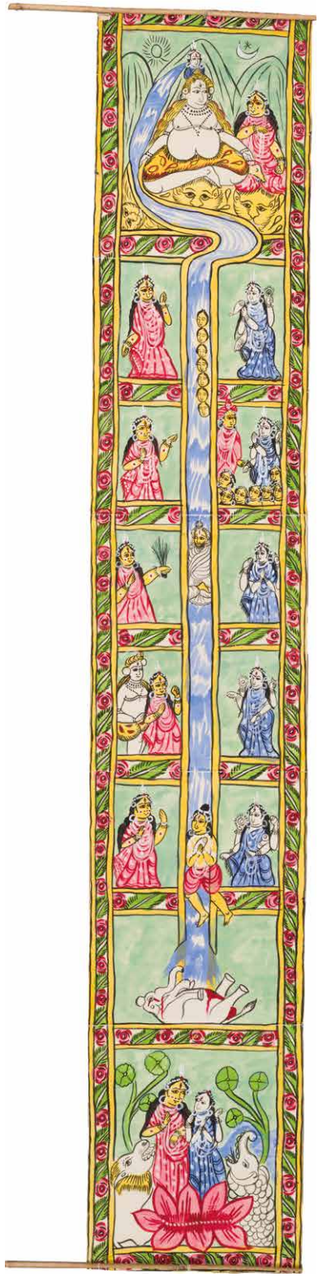
19 Elmira Gyul, *Art Encyclopedia...*, p. 172.
20 *Ibidem*, p. 62.

In Hinduism, rivers are considered to be earthly forms of goddesses, so they are worshipped. They are associated with many rituals, but, above all, they have the power to cleanse the soul. The three most important of these sacred rivers intersect in the city of Prayagraj. These are the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Sarasvati, although today, the latter is a legendary river, as it dried up several thousand years ago.
Goddesses Sarasvatī and Ga□gā, both mentioned in the oldest Sanskrit texts – □*gveda*, descended to earth and took the physical forms of rivers as a result of curses they cast on each other during their argument. Sarasvatī added that Ga□gā as a river would also gather the sins of all people.
Prayagraj is one of the four places where the Kumbha Mela festival is cyclically celebrated, and its date is determined on the basis of the position of the celestial bodies. At the beginning of 2025, the Maha (Great) Kumbha Mela took place. 660 million pilgrims arrived in the city to redeem their sins and purify their souls by immersing themselves in the waters at the place where the rivers intersect.

Goddess Yamunā and Guru Vallabha making offerings to God Śrīnāthjī
The Shilpa Process company (Producer)
India, Rajasthan, ca. 1980
printing on aluminium, engraving
42 × 56,5 cm
donated by Krishna Kumar Jajodia
MAP 8049

Yamunā
In the city of Nathdwara in Rajasthan, there is a temple dedicated to God Śrīnāthjī – the local form of Lord Kṛṣṇa. The place became extremely popular thanks to Guru Vallabha, a philosopher who authored a poem about Śrīnāthjī. This was also the reason why the images that repeat the form of a relief depicting the god in the temple accompanied by Goddess Yamunā and Guru Vallabha making offerings have also become so commonly known.
Yamunā in the form of a river plays a vital role in the story of Lord Kṛṣṇa. When his father fled with newly born Kṛṣṇa to hide him in the family of cowherds, the waters of the Yamuna River parted and provided them a safe passage. The village where little Kṛṣṇa grew up was located on the Yamuna riverbanks, and thus the river is mentioned in several stories related to him.

Representations of Goddess Yamunā are especially popular in Rajasthani painting compared to other regions of India. She is depicted as a young woman with blue skin, dressed in opulent attire, adorned with jewels, with a crown on the top of her head and lotus garlands in her hands.



The fight between Goddess Gaṅgā
(the Ganges River) and Goddess Durgā
Nonin Gopal
India, West Bengal, near Medinipur, the 1970s
watercolours on paper
186,5 × 32,5 cm
MAP 4744

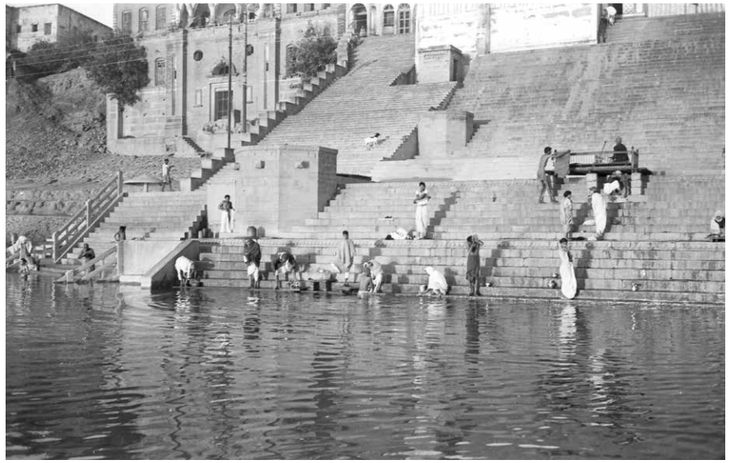
Gaṅgā
In English, it has become common to speak of the goddess as Gaṅgā, and of the physical river as the Ganges. However, the river is the impersonation of the goddess. In the sacred texts of the Hindu tradition, we can find information that depositing the remains of the dead person in the Ganges shall ensure this person's place in heaven, even if they were sinners during their lifetime. Worshiping it, drinking its water and bathing in it are more effective than all the other sacrifices and offerings, as well as asceticism. It is believed that the place where its powers are exceptionally strong is the city of Varanasi in India, as it is directly connected with Heaven.
Paṭa scroll-painting originates in Bengal. The story of an argument between Goddess Gaṅgā and Goddess Durgā over the attention of their husband – Lord Śiva – is also popular mainly in Bengal – it will not be found in other regions.
In the picture, Gaṅgā is depicted both as a woman with white skin, in a blue sari, and a river flowing through the centre of the entire painting. In the last scene, she is accompanied by her mount – *makara*, a mythological water creature.

Goddess Sarasvatī
Nepal, the 1970s
woodcut on handmade paper
47,5 × 35 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 6188

Sarasvatī
The Sarasvati River flowed through the Indian subcontinent in prehistoric times. In the valley of the two rivers that it formed together with the Indus River, one of the first civilizations in the world developed – with the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. One of the hypotheses of the fall of this civilization is the sudden dry-up of the Sarasvati River. Although the river no longer physically exists, as a goddess it is still one of the most distinguished figures in the Hindu pantheon.
Initially, Goddess Sarasvatī was associated with sound, speech and in this way, also with a ritual involving the recitation of hymns. That is why she often holds a musical instrument known as veena, a manuscript written on palm leaves which symbolises the sacred texts, a rosary and a water vessel used for ritual purposes. She mounts a royal goose or a peacock. She is always dressed in white, often surrounded by white lotuses growing in the water, which symbolise spiritual purity. Later, she also started to be associated with knowledge (conveyed orally). Today, she is primarily seen as the goddess of wisdom.

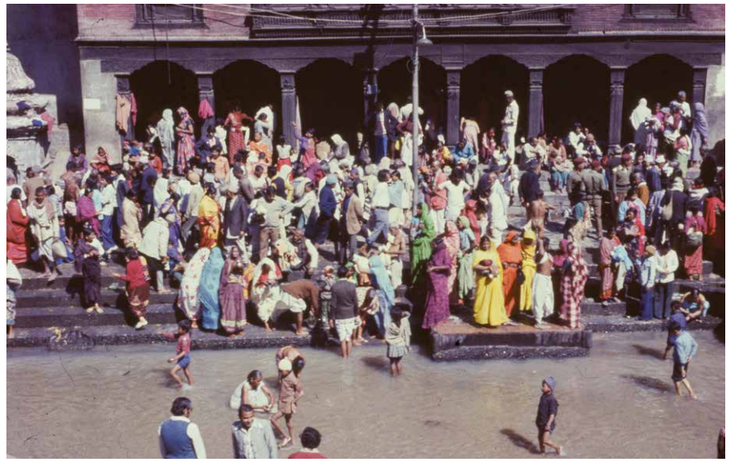
For Christians, baptism is a sacrament, the purpose of which is to erase original sin by symbolically pouring the believer with water. Pilgrims to the Holy Land, and thus the places associated with the beginnings of Christianity, sometimes renew their baptismal vows by immersing themselves in the waters of the Jordan River, the place assumed to be where Jesus was baptised. This is considered a renewal of their personal bond with the faith.

Israel, ca. 1985–1990
Photo by Jan Petschl, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 94/647



Along the Ganges River in Varanasi, we can see ghats – riverbanks reinforced with stone stairs. On the very top of them, there are temples and sometimes also sites where the dead are cremated. According to the Hindu ritual, the ashes of the dead should be thrown into the river.

India, the 1970s
Photo by Jerzy Chociłowski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 14/2753



Paśupatināth Āryaghāṭ at the Paśupatināth (Śiva) Temple is the largest ghat in Nepal, where devotees take baths every day to wash away their sins. On the banks, there are also sites dedicated to pyres, where the dead are cremated, and in the evening, a special offering ritual called *pūjā* takes place.

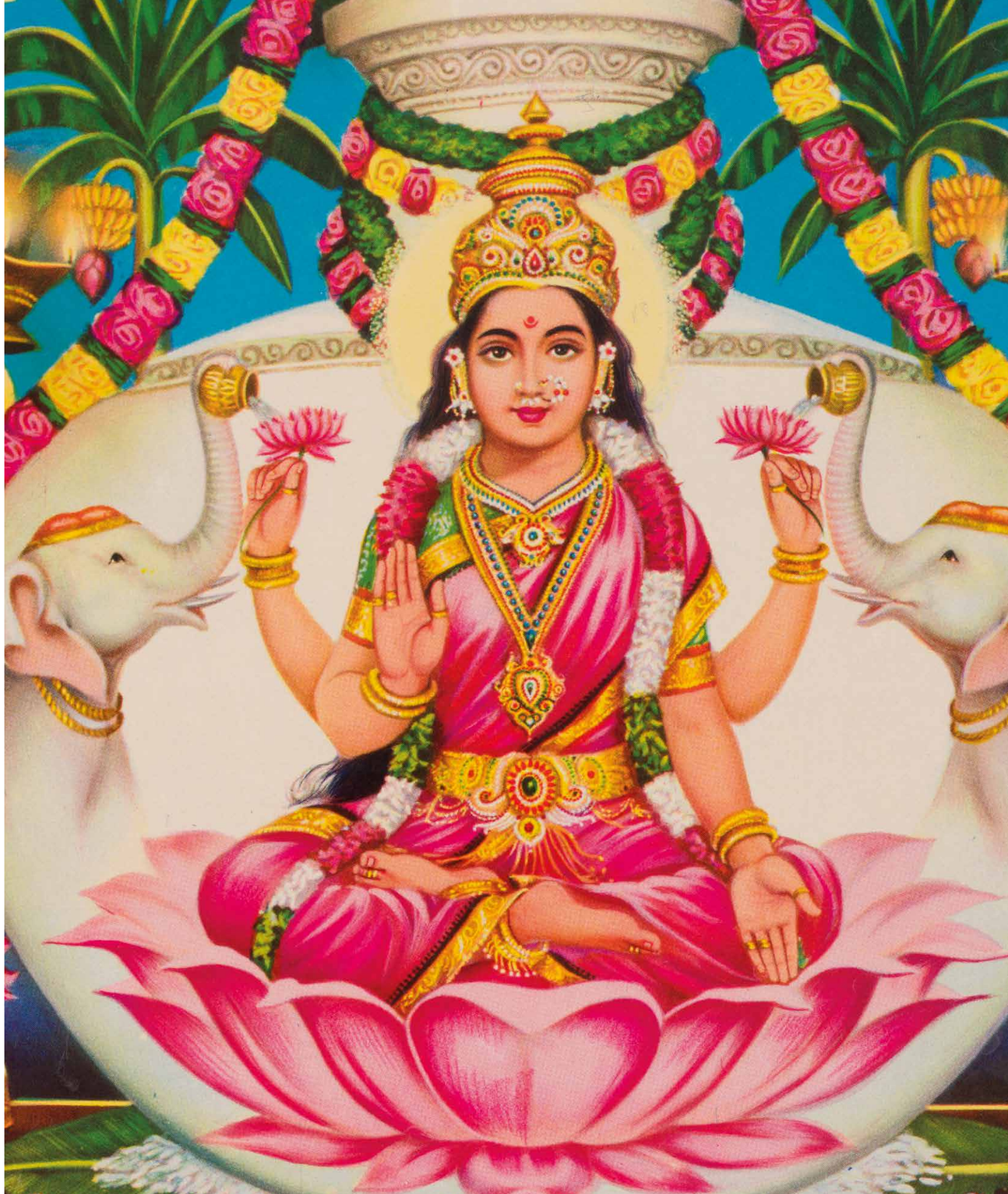
Nepal, Kathmandu, 1978
Photo by Andrzej Wawrzyniak, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP 1/2678

THE POWER OF WATER

Springs, rivers and seas have been associated with various beliefs, and the water drawn from them has been attributed magical or healing powers. Poured into a bottle, it can serve as a souvenir from a pilgrimage, a supply for the future or a gift for those in need. A bottle of water from the Ganges – the sacred river of Hinduism – may have a label with information in which rituals it can be used. Bottled water is also brought back home by Muslim pilgrims visiting the holy Zamzam Well in Mecca.

Water is also believed to be a medium enhancing the power of prayers, spells and broadly understood magical endeavours. These kinds of practices are carried out near water reservoirs or over vessels filled with the life-giving water.

Additionally, water determines geographical borders and either separates or connects the world of living with the otherworld. It is also associated with rites of passage. In Papua New Guinea, the spirit boat *Wuramon* was used during the initiation ceremony of boys who entered adulthood. On the other hand, Hindu funeral rites, which involve the cremation of the deceased and throwing their ashes into the river, are performed to ensure spiritual purification and successful reincarnation or liberation of the soul from the cycle of death and rebirth.



Magic and healing bowl
Iran, 19th/20th c.
brass, engraving
4,5 × 15 × 15 cm
donated by Lech Kończak
MAP 21963

The Arabic alphabet, in which the Qur'an – the holy book of Islam – was written, has become an important element of culture, art, and everyday life. Some Muslim communities are known to perform rituals based on the belief that water that entered into direct contact with calligraphed passages of the Qur'an acquires protective and healing properties.[21]
Characteristic bowls with a central protrusion in the bottom and inscriptions in Arabic script, which were thought to have magical properties, in Persian culture had been known since at least the 12th century and with the spread of Islam, they also reached Indonesia.[22] It was believed that water drunk from such a vessel during childbirth or illness brought relief and supported the healing process. In Indonesia, according to local custom, such bowls were filled with water with hibiscus flowers floating on its surface.[23]

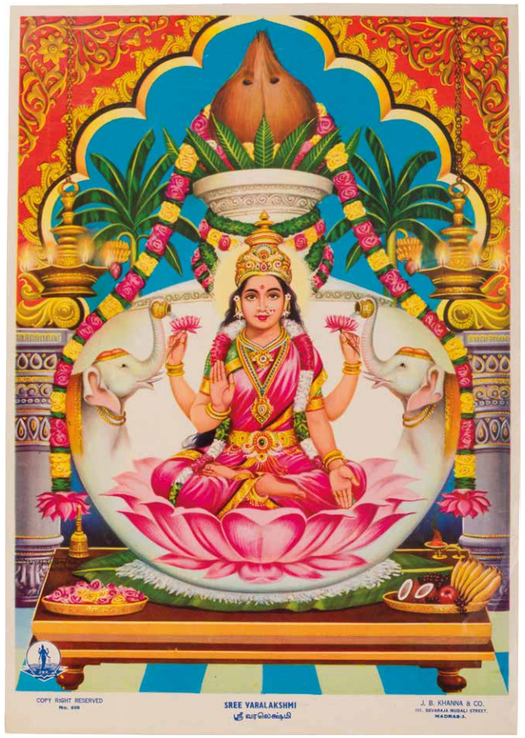
21 Emilie Savage-Smith, "Safavid Magic Bowls," [in:] *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1505–1576*, Thompson, J., Canby, S.R., eds., Milan, 2003, pp. 240–247.

22 *Ibidem*; Baldev Singh, *Malay Brassware: A Guide to the Collections*, Singapore, 1985.

23 Baldev Singh, *Malay Brassware: A Guide...*

Bottle with water from the Ganges River
India, Varanasi, 2001
plastic, water
27 × 10,5 × 7,5 cm
donated by Urszula Sura-Mamcarczyk
WPŁ/2024/880

The Ganges River is considered sacred. In Hinduism, people believe that its water has cleansing, sin-absolving, blessing and healing properties. The devotees make pilgrimages to the holy places located on its banks and they bring water from there. At the stalls nearby, they can buy metal containers that resemble jugs and can be used if one wants to fill them with water by themselves, as well as water in plastic bottles that would be later used in the religious rituals performed at home.
On the bottle, there is a torso of Lord Śiva – we can see streams of water in his hair. Lord Śiva agreed to first accept the impetus of the falling water onto his head before Goddess Gaṅgā descended to the earth in the form of a river.

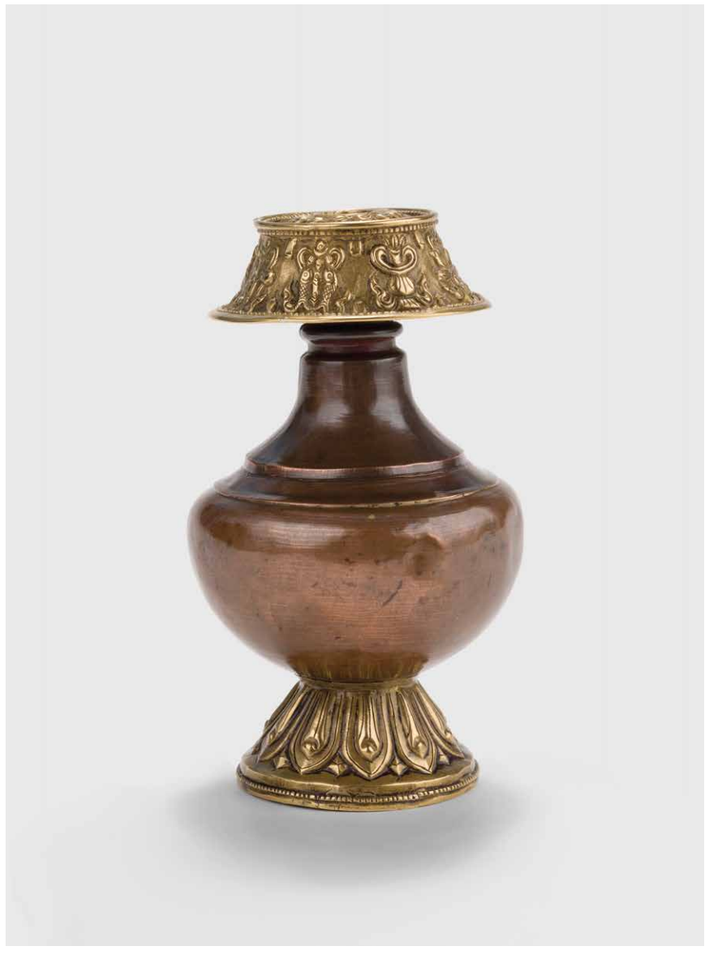


Symbolic depiction of Goddess Varalakṣmī's presence in a *kalaśa* jug
G.B. Syryakant (Artist), J.B. Khanna and Co. (Publisher)
India, Tamil Nadu, Chennai, the 1970s
chromolithography on paper
36 × 25 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 4809

In Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, various vessels are used for ritual water. Their shape and the material from which they are made depend on the purpose and place of origin of such vessels.
A *kamaṇḍalu* is a small water pot, made of hollowed-out gourd or pumpkin, coconut shell, metal, or wood, usually with a handle. It is a characteristic attribute of Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist ascetics. As a vessel for *amṛta* – the divine elixir of life and immortality – and due to its importance in the rituals, it is an attribute of a number of Hindu gods and goddesses, including Sárasvatī and Brahmā, as well as of divinities in Buddhism, such as Buddha Maitreya or Bodhisattvas.
Another similar vessel is *kalaśa*. This kind of metal jug is made of brass, copper, silver or gold. It can also be used to store non-water offerings, and most often we would see it decorated with fresh mango leaves and coconut. Its image is an auspicious sign, placed in homes and public spaces.

The water stored in these vessels symbolises *amṛta*. It is considered holy water, used for sprinkling or pouring during rituals.
The chromolithograph depicts the *kalaśa* jug decorated with leaves and a coconut for the feast of young wives. During the ceremonies, women invoke and worship Goddess Varalakṣmī, who is the blessing form of Goddess Lakṣmī. The jug symbolises the goddess and her presence during the festival. It is decorated with saris and flowers, various offerings are placed in front of it, and in return, the goddess of prosperity grants women boons. The author of the composition depicted the symbolic presence very literally and inscribed the image of the goddess in the shape of a jug.

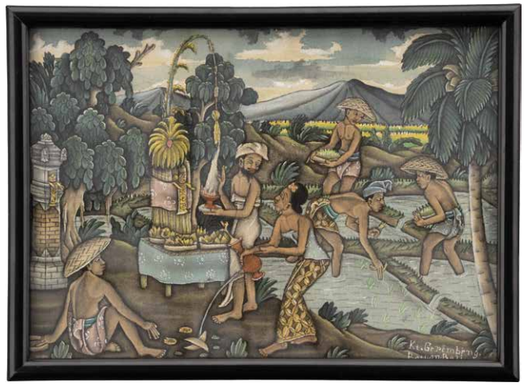
Water vessel used in Hindu rituals
India, West Bengal, the 1970s/the 1980s
brass, engraving
17,3 × 11,4 × 11,4 cm
donated by Escorts Ltd, a company from Calcutta
MAP 7164



Tsebum vase (the vase of life) used in a Buddhist ritual aimed at prolonging life
Mongolia (?),1st half of the 20th c.
copper, brass, repoussé, engraving
14,2 × 8,4 × 8,4 cm
MAP 9218

Altar vase intended for water consecrated by a *lama* – a spiritual teacher in Tibetan Buddhism who has gone through the required ordinations to perform religious duties and teach. Such a person is often also a monk.
The vase does not have a spout. It is used for a Buddhist ritual, which is believed to ensure a long life. The *lama* then invokes Buddha Amitayus – worshiped since the 4th century as the Buddha of Longevity. In religious art, Amitayus is usually depicted holding such a vessel in both hands, and the vessel is believed to be filled with *amṛta* – the nectar of immortality. The *lama* who performs the ritual brings his monk's symbolic sceptre – a vajra – close to the vessel held by Buddha Amitayus in the image, believing that by this gesture, the power of the Buddha will pass into his heart. Then he personally places the real vase with consecrated water on the bowed heads of the kneeling believers, while reciting a short prayer – the *mantra* for Amitayus. The *mantra* is repeated by all participants of the rite. The vessel should be covered with a peacock feather sprinkler or *kuśa* grass.[24]

24 *Catalogue of the Tibetan Collection... The Newark Museum. Vol. II, Prayer and Objects Associated with Prayer*, Newark, New Jersey, 1973, p. 43.

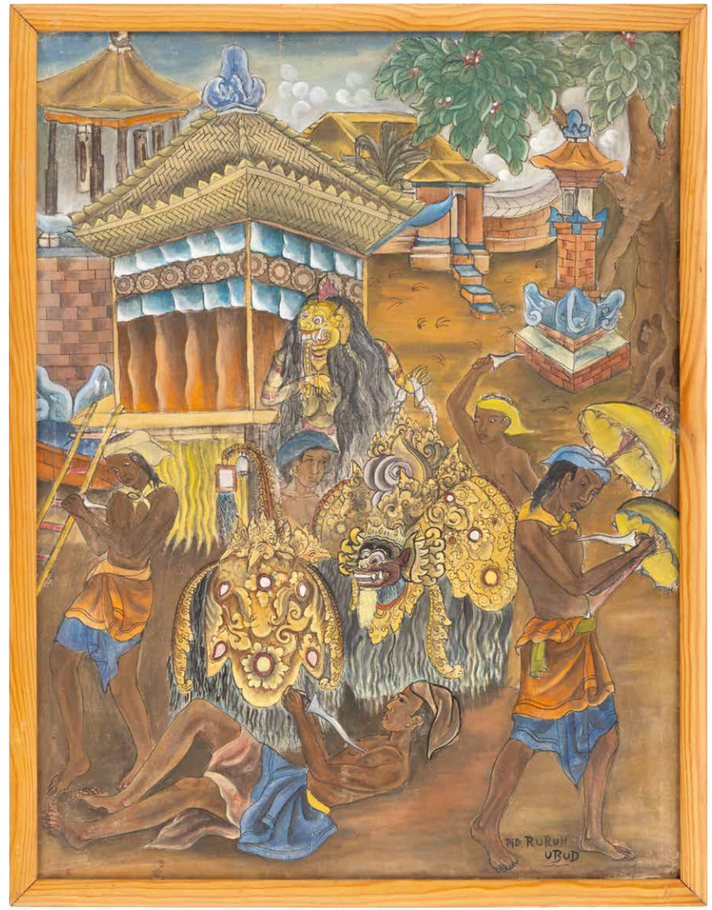


Offering rituals for successful harvests
Kt. Gerembeng
Indonesia, Bali, Batuan, the 1970s
gouache on canvas
21,5 × 30 cm
MAP 20386

Offering bowl for water and flowers
Laos, before 1987
brass, silver, repoussé
26 × 27 × 27 cm
MAP 10532

Scoop for ritual pouring water
Indonesia, Sumatra, ca. 1850
wood, lacquerware
9,5 × 27 × 11 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 2580

The wooden, carved scoop was used in a number of rites, including ritual washing of the body during Javanese celebrations, such as weddings or *mitoni*, or pouring water from springs into vessels. In the case of *mitoni*, a ceremony on the occasion of the 7th month of the first pregnancy, a decorative vessel stores water brought from seven springs and petals of flowers float on its surface. Seven persons indicated by the tradition use the scoop to wash the head, body and feet of the pregnant woman and, doing so, they ritually cleanse both her and the baby.



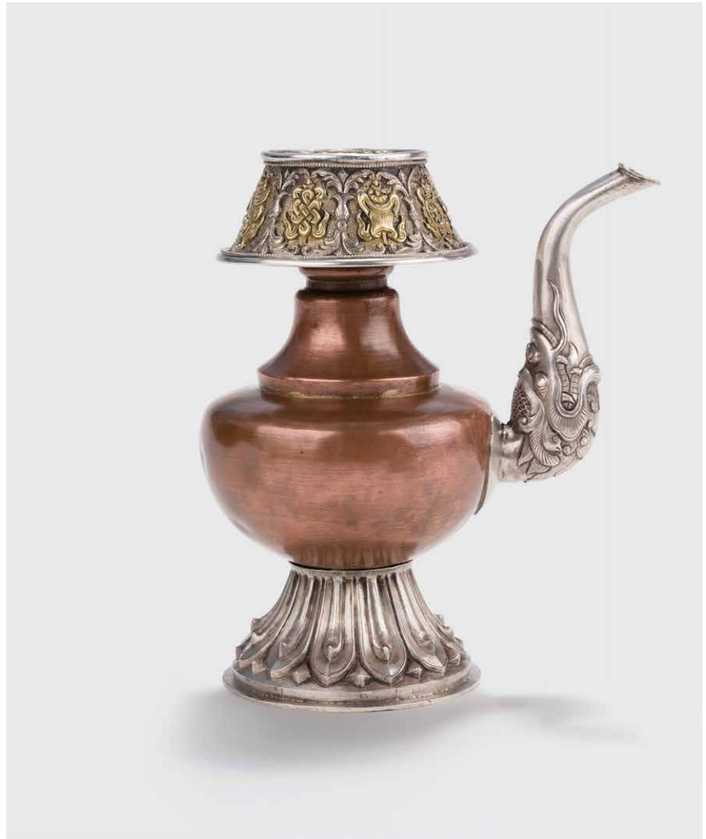
Ritual dance of the mythical Barong and men who stab themselves with daggers in a trance. The dancers are woken up from trance by the priest who sprinkles them with water blessed by Barong.
Made Ruruh
Indonesia, Bali, Ubud, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
tempera on canvas
59 × 45 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 2188

The painting depicts a Hindu temple in Bali during the performance of the Calonarang ritual. In the ritual, the dancers reenact the eternal battle between good and evil, personified by Barong, a mythical creature located in the centre, and Calonarang, a witch standing behind him with long hair and fangs. The men depicted next to them are trying to pierce their torsos with daggers called *kris*, but since they are in a trance, they do not hurt themselves. The ceremony ends with a priest who brings the men out of their trance, sprinkling them with water[25] previously consecrated by Barong who had soaked his beard in it. It is believed that his magical power is concentrated in his beard, and that is why water in which he would soak his beard was used to heal people, also during epidemics.

25 Anna Kerber, "Stany transowe w wybranych obrzędach i rytuałach współczesnej Bali," in: *W cieniu przodków. Obrzędy społeczności Indonezji i Birmy, Vol. 1: Paralele: folklor, literatura, kultura*, Toruń, 2013, p. 335.

Bowl for water used in many rituals
Indonesia, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
brass, engraving
16 × 26 × 26 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 1975

A bowl decorated with geometric and floral patterns is used in Indonesia as a vessel for sacrificial water. In many Indonesian cultures, water is considered sacred and believed to have purifying and/or healing properties. Poured into such a bowl, with flower petals on the surface, it is offered to spirits before the beginning of shadow theatre performances, during the celebration of the Javanese New Year and on other occasions.



Waza *bumpa* używana w buddyjskich rytuałach, w tym podczas inicjacji
Mongolia (?), 1 poł. XX w.
miedź, biały metal, repusowanie, rytowanie, mosiądzowanie
15,6 × 12,7 × 8,8 cm
MAP 9219

Waza, stawiana na buddyjskim ołtarzu, na poświęcaną wodę używaną podczas ceremonii religijnych. Nie zachowało się kropidło z pawich piór lub trawy *kuśa* oraz niewielkie, okrągłe lusterko z metalu zawieszane przy dziobku.
Tego typu woda zawiera odrobinę szafranu i czasem cukru. Lama dokonuje jej poświęcenia. Wodę taką rozpryskuje się na wiernych kropidłem lub nalewa im jej trochę na nadstawione ręce[26].
Na powierzchniach naczynia widnieją liczne symbole, w większości buddyjskie, a niektóre z nich związane są z wodą: na stopce stylizowany kwiat lotosu – rośliny wodnej, symbolu mocy stwórczych, poznania i czystości; dziobek zaś jest ujęty przez pysk *makary* – wodnej hybrydy zwierzęcej, ukazywanej m.in. jako krokodyl z trąbą słonia i pochodzącej z mitologii indyjskiej. *Makara* w buddyzmie symbolizuje życiodajną moc wody. Natomiast na kryzie wokół wylewu możemy zauważyć, częsty w Tybecie i Mongolii, zestaw ośmiu pomyślnych symboli[27].

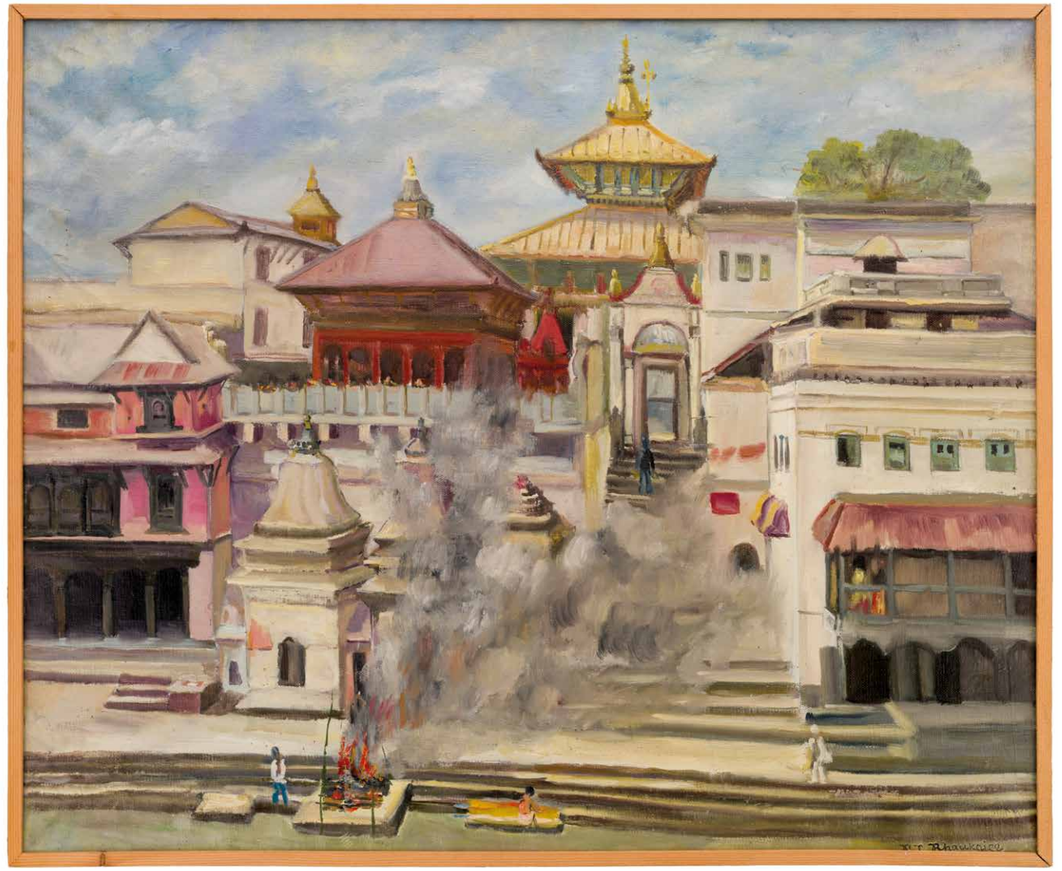
26 *Catalogue of the Tibetan Collection...Vol. II*, s. 42.

27 R. Beer, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, Boston 1999, s. 68–69, 171nn, 218nn.

Spirit boat canoe – *wuramon*, symbolising the transfer of the deceased into the supernatural world of Safan
Indonesia, Papua, 20th / 21st c.
polychromed wood
21 × 254 × 21 cm
MAP 18942

The carved spirit boat – *wuramon* – was used only to perform initiation rituals in the Asmat community living in the Indonesian province of Papua. Before being able to take part in a rite of passage to become men, boys were isolated for several months in houses built specifically for this purpose. At that time, a boat was carved. It never had a full hull because it was not intended to be used on water. It was used only once – when the boys left the confinement. Following the ritual, they had to crawl under the boat, then they were caught and went through the ritual of scarification; their skin was cut in a specific way for them to obtain scars of an intended shape. After the ceremony, they were perceived as adults. The carved figures, who were the "passengers" of the boat, represented dangerous water spirits (*ambirak*). A sculpture of a turtle was usually placed in the centre because it symbolised fertility due to the fact that it lays many eggs. Human figures, on the other hand, were the dead on the way to Safan – in the Asmat beliefs, the world in which people live after death.[28]

28 Nicolas Thomas, Peter Brunt, *Oceania*, London, 2018, p. 282.



"Paśupatinath as a Sacred Place"
(view of the funeral pyres on the Paśupati Āryaghāṭ waterfront on the Bagmati River in Kathmandu into which the ashes of the dead are thrown)
Ram Kumar Bhaukajee
Nepal, 1983
oil on canvas
75 × 91 cm
DEP 23

Across the capital city of Nepal – Kathmandu – flows the Bagmati River. It is considered sacred by followers of both Hinduism and Buddhism. Along its banks, there are many cult places, including temples, hermitages, and burial sites. The capital is also home to Paśupatināth Āryaghāṭ, one of the largest ghats (wide stairs leading to the river) in Nepal, where cremation sites are located. Hindu people believe that the water from every river that is considered sacred cleanses the soul of dead from sins, and throwing the ashes of the deceased into the Bagmati River can help liberate the soul from the cycle of incarnations (*saṃsāra*) because the river merges – trough other rivers – with the waters of the Ganges and the latter has the power to stop the incarnation cycle.

In Islam, ablution, that is washing the body with water is the ritual that must be observed before performing the five prayers during the day. Muslims express certain formulas (intentions) and wash their hands, face, forearms, moisten their hair and wash their feet with water. In the Ottoman mosques, ablutions are performed by the *shadirvan* fountain located in the courtyard. It has several taps and stone seats placed there for their users' convenience.

Turkey, Istanbul, Süleymaniye Mosque, 2011
Photo by np&djjewell, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0

On the altar in Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism, various ritual objects are placed in front of religious paintings and sculptures, and they include a reliquary – a *stūpa*, a censer, butter lamps and bowls for water offerings (there should be at least seven of them). Clean water, changed every morning, serves as such an offering. Before religious rituals, the bowls are filled with pure water, as well as water with saffron, flowers, incense, oil lamp fuel, perfume and food (*tsampa*).

Mongolia, 1994
Photo by Maciej Góralski, from the collection of the Asia and Pacific Museum
WIZ/MAP/55/46

The women in the photograph are using scoops to take out water and pour it into vessels in order to empty the natural spring. The spring is then cleaned and refilled with water. These activities are part of the Kuras Sendang ritual which symbolises purification before starting a new cycle, so that the local people always remain refreshed and full of good thoughts. The ritual is accompanied by singing, prayers and artistic performances.[29]

Indonesia, Java, Bantul, 2025
Photo by Nadja Ritter, private collection

29 Muhlis Huda Subekti, *Tradisi Kuras Sendang Angin-angin Padukuhan Guwo*, 10.10.2023, https://triwidadi.bantulkab.go.id/first/artikel/759-Tradisi-Kuras-Sendang-Angin-angin-Padukuhan-Guwo, (access: 25.09.2025).

WATER AS A SOURCE OF PLEASURE

Not everyone associates water with a holiday destination or retreat. This may stem from religious and cultural reasons. Open waters – such as seas and rivers – may evoke a sense of fear. Storms, waves and whirlpools oftentimes pose a very real danger, and the depths are thought to conceal the unknown. Some communities avoid bathing in local waters because of their customs and traditions – some consider the sea to be a sacred place, others believe it is inhabited by dangerous creatures and spirits.

In some Islamic countries, in turn, spending time by the sea, wearing swimming suits and beach attire, is not always culturally accepted, as the religion commonly requires modesty.

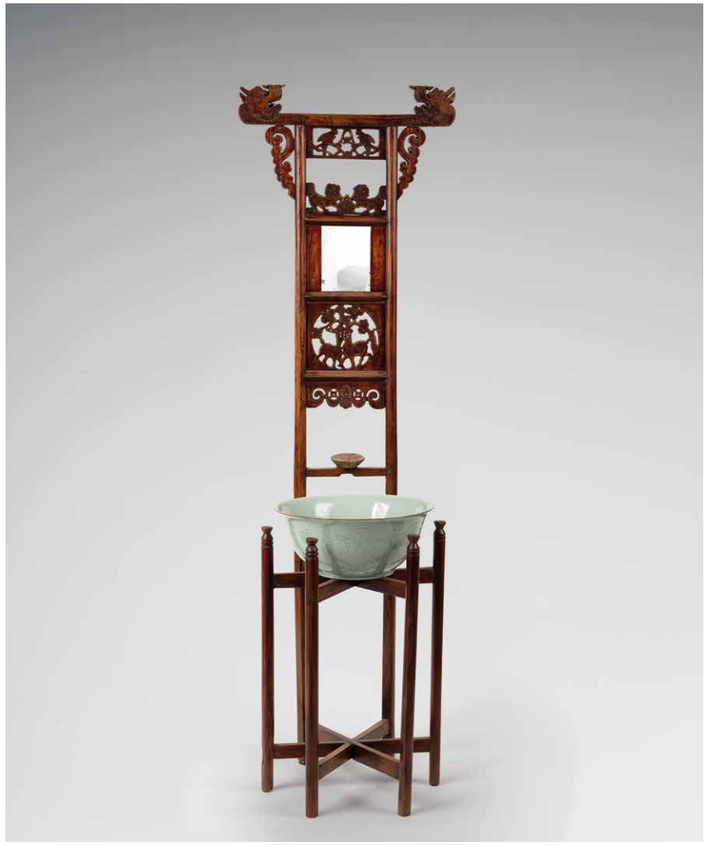
But many of us are happy to use the opportunity of being in the vicinity of water and having direct contact with it – be it sea or lake.

RELAXATION

Bathing allows people to maintain hygiene, but it can also favour relaxation and regeneration. Objects and accessories used for body cleansing have often been lavishly decorated, which clearly indicates that their function surpassed the solely utilitarian one. A visit to a Turkish bath – a *hammam* – required from visitors to wear clogs with a sole supported by wooden plates to protect their feet against temperature and moisture, and the mother-of-pearl decorations on such footwear manifested the high social status of their owners. For the rich, home baths were equally special thanks to the ornamented objects surrounding the routine, including dressing tables, bowls or soap dishes. Additionally, women indulging in this intimate activity have often been an inspiration to artists in many regions of the world.

Bath clogs – *nalın*
Turkey (former Ottoman Empire),
2nd half of the 19th c.
wood, mother-of-pearl, fabric embroidered with metal-braided thread and sequins
6 × 7 × 24 cm
MAP 21488/a–b

Made of a single piece of wood, *nalın* bath clogs, characteristic for their high plate-supported sole and ornaments, were among the accessories used during bathing rituals/bathing in a hammam in the Ottoman Empire until the beginning of the Turkish Republic. This type of footwear, protecting its owners' feet from soapy and dirty water running down the floor, was commonly used in Turkish baths primarily by women, but also by men and children.
Nalın clogs are among the popular examples of Ottoman craftsmanship. Their base was carved from a hardwood such as plane, walnut, ebony or sandalwood. They were also embellished with the use of sophisticated techniques and precious materials, such as mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell and silver filigree. Clog straps were attached to the wooden sole and wrapped around the top of the foot. They were made of fabric, leather, and in more luxurious versions decorated with precious stones, pearls and embroidered with metal-braided threads.
The value of the materials, the quality of the footwear and the height of the clogs reflected the socio-economic status of its owner. Based on the preserved examples, Ottoman miniatures, but also paintings and prints by European artists who visited the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, it can be determined that the height of plates supporting the soles of this type of clogs ranged from about 5 to even 20–30 cm.



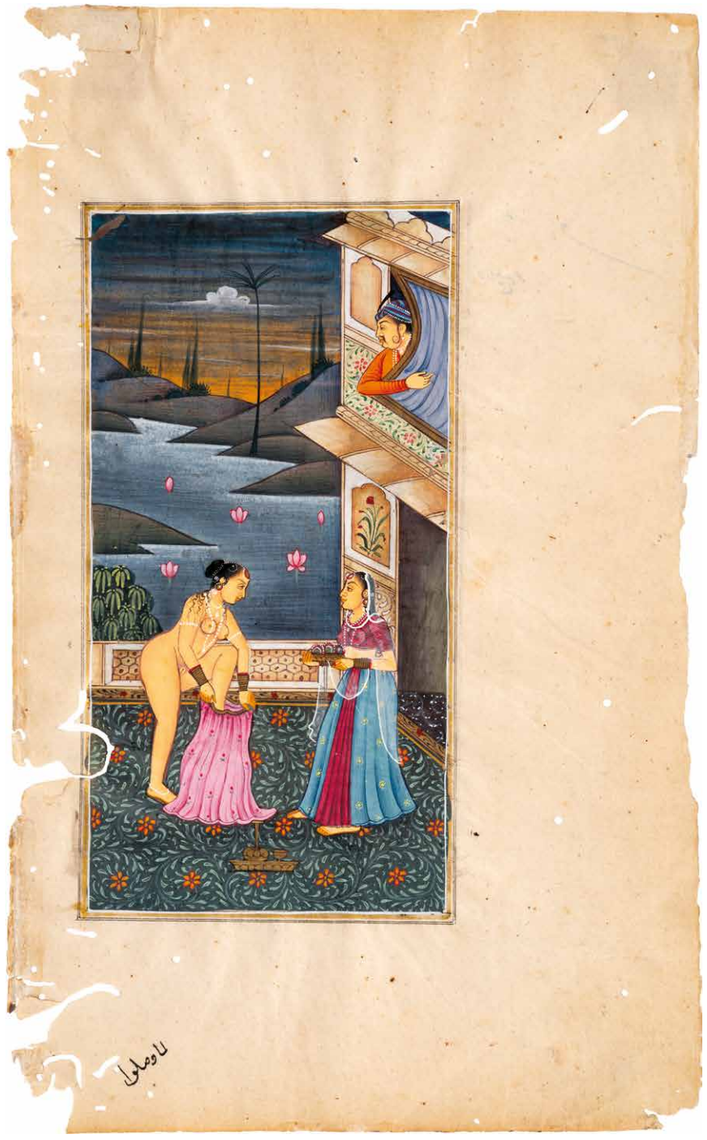
Toiletry set

Washing bowl
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
stoneware with imprinted patterns, celadon glaze, gilding
15,5 × 37 × 37 cm
MAP 19897

Washstand
China, 1rd quarter of the 20th c.
polychromed wood, mirror glass
161,5 × 44 × 37 cm
MAP 19896

An openwork, standing washstand with a mirror, forming a set with a bowl covered with celadon glaze, is an example of elaborate Chinese artistic craftsmanship. The wooden stand of the washbasin is decorated with carved animal motifs, arranged in a symmetrical design. In the upper part, there are dragons (symbolising strength, power, dignity and prosperity), parrots (symbolising the colours of life) and lions (symbolising strength, protection and majesty). Below the mirror, in a circular field, there are two deer among the blooming branches of trees. In Chinese, the word "deer" phonetically corresponds to the word meaning "official's salary," so the deer symbolises wealth and promotion. It is often depicted in the company of other symbols of prosperity; here, among the blooming trees that represent the renewal, life and the beauty of nature.[30] The bowl is supported by six legs. Four of them are decorated with *the wàn* 卐 – a symbol associated in Chinese tradition with good fortune, longevity, and prosperity. It is worth noting here that this is a sign connected to Buddhism and in China, it has traditionally represented entirely positive aspects, completely unrelated to much later abuses and appropriations present in Western history.
The surface of the bowl is decorated with stylised dragons among the clouds. Due to the careful selection of symbols and decorative forms, the set not only had a utilitarian function but also conveyed the great abundance of meanings, including wishes for good fortune, harmony and long life.

30 Charles Alfred Speed Williams, Terence Barrow, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Tokyo, Rutland, Vermont, Singapore, 2018.



The toilet of a princess
India, before 1989
gouache on paper
20,1 × 12,3 cm
MAP 12189

Young women bathing in the river
Kt. Sukardjo
Indonesia, Bali, Batuan, the 1970s
gouache on canvas
30,5 × 19,5 cm
MAP 20389

Lord Kṛṣṇa stealing clothes of shepherdesses bathing in the river
India, ca. 1950
watercolours on coconut fibre fabric
35,5 × 25 cm
MAP 14905

The painting depicts an episode in the life of young Lord K⊠s⊠a and is still one of the most popular motifs in local literature and art. It also tells us a lot about hygienic habits, including those of modern-day India. On the last day of the month, during which women fasted and performed religious rituals, all the ladies from the village went to the river together to take a bath. Although the aim was of a hygienic nature, the occasion turned into a social event when women had fun, spent time and relaxed together. Young Kṛṣṇa was known as a rascal and troublemaker, and he often teased the shepherdesses. He sneaked up on the bathing women, took their clothes left on the bank and hung them on the high branches of a nearby tree. Kṛṣṇa instructed the women that by bathing naked, they broke their fast[31], but when the shepherdesses folded their hands in a begging gesture, he finally made the branches of the tree bend down and gave them their clothes back.

31 Cornelia Dimmitt, J.A.B. Van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas*, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 122–124.

There are many ways of deriving pleasure from having contact with water. One of them is practicing sports, such as, for instance, surfing. A popular spot, which attracts lovers of this sport with its wonderful waves, is the beach in Kuta, Bali, where the presented photo was taken.

Indonesia, Bali, 2011
Photo by Maria Szymańska-Ilnata, private collection

Originating in ancient Persia, the four-quarter garden with symmetrical layout divided by channels and fountains was adopted to the Islamic tradition as early as the 7th century. In this culture, such gardens began to function as symbols of paradise, and the channels separating them were associated with the four paradise rivers described in the Qur'an. With the expansion of Islam and its increasing influence, the architecture of such gardens spread over vast regions – from Andalusia to India.

Iran, Shiraz, 2006
Photo by Magdalena Ginter-Frołow, private collection

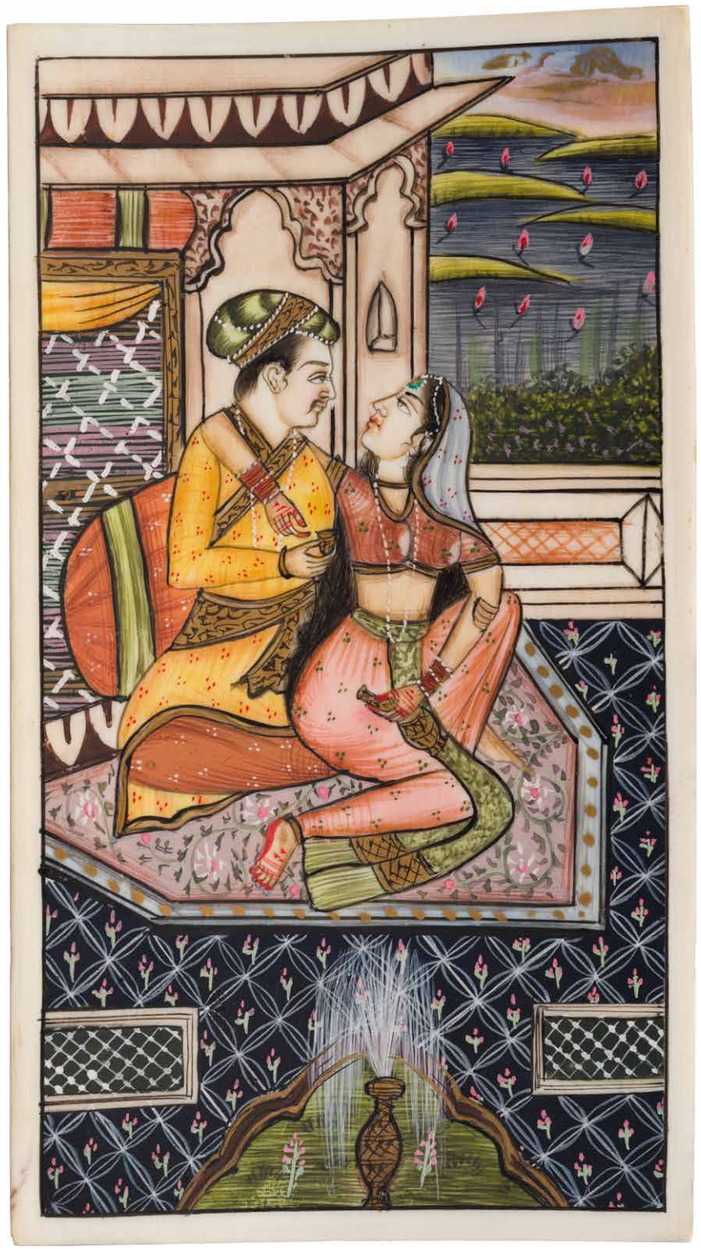
Since Indonesia is located in an active volcanic zone, it also has hot springs. In places where they occur, swimming pools are built, and according to many people, bathing in them has not only relaxing but also therapeutic and healing effects.

Indonesia, Bali, 2007
Photo by Maria Szymańska-Ilnata, private collection

WATER IN GARDENS

People have always enjoyed the refreshment provided by water. It has therefore become an essential element of gardens almost all over Asia. In the Islamic tradition, narrow canals and fountains that symmetrically divided gardens into four parts not only organised the space but also symbolised divine order. Due to the expansion of Persian influence, the concept of canals and garden fountains found its way to South Asia, where it became a permanent part of palace architecture. In Indian art, water flowing through the garden often accompanies depictions of lovers and rain bears another layer of meaning – it symbolises the act of lovemaking.

In East Asia, China or Japan, water reservoirs in gardens were designed differently – a smooth surface of water was often juxtaposed with rocks, and the entire surrounding was thought to give the impression of having been created by nature. The two mentioned elements symbolise the opposing forces that harmoniously coexist.



Lovers by the fountain in the palace,
with a lotus pond in the background
India, Rajasthan, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
tempera on ivory
11,4 × 6,5 cm
donated by Krishna Kumar Jajodia
MAP 7359

The ancient Sanskrit treatise on theatre *Nāṭya-shāstra* describes different types of heroines in love, called *nāyikā*. They can be found in literature and art to this day, often presented in conventions developed over the centuries.
The best time for love meetings was night, and the best season was the monsoon season. Just as the rain nourishes the dried earth, it moistens everything and makes plants turn green and bloom, so it provides lovers with respite, pleasure and serves as fuel for love. Lotus ponds are often visible in the background – closed lotus buds indicate the arrival of the lovers' meeting time, as flowers close for the night.
Other species, however, bloom at night, and such ponds turn into meeting spots for couples in love.[32]
In the palace scenes, on the other hand, we can observe gardens full of fountains, ponds, and erotically stimulating plants in the background.[33]
Rain, lotuses and night are typical symbols that suggest the amorous atmosphere. These visual codes are still in use today, e.g., in films where usually at least one scene shows a meeting of lovers in the rain and suggests their intimate encounter, which cannot be shown directly due to censorship.

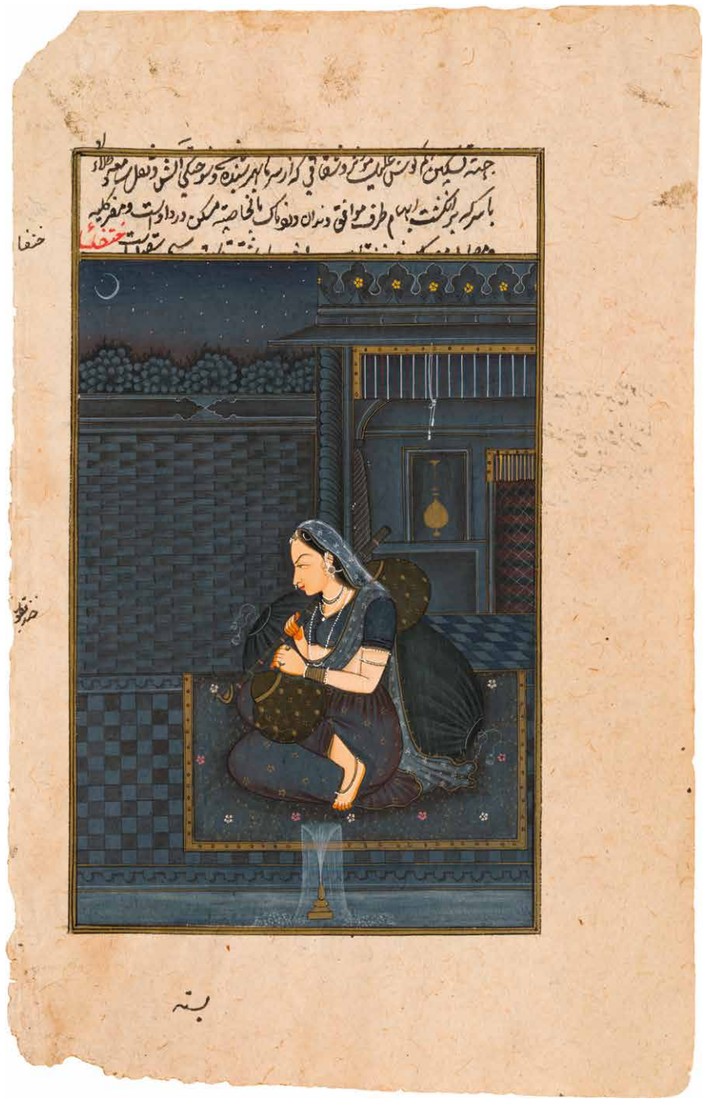
32 Mohider Singh Randhawa, *Kangra Paintings on Love*, Delhi, 1994.

33 Imma Ramos, "'*Private Pleasures' of the Mughal Empire*," in: *Art History*, 2014, Vol. 37(3), p. 418.

Romantic scene on the patio by the water
pond – an intrinsic element of love depictions
India, before 1989
gouache on paper
24,5 × 15,5 cm
donated by A.K. Misra
MAP 12219

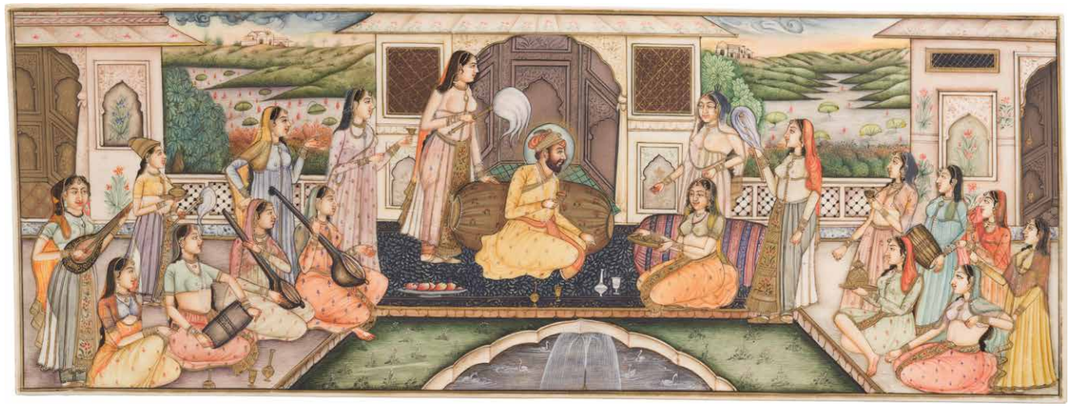
Two women in a garden by the water
Japan, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
colour woodcut on handmade paper
41,5 × 30 cm
MAP 3228

Pleasures of aristocrats during the reign
of the Great Mughal dynasty
India, 2nd half of the 20th c.
gouache and gilding on paper
27 × 17,5 cm
MAP 16607



Miniature depicting *nāyikā* – a romantic heroine playing a lute by the palace fountain
India, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
gouache and gilding on paper
4,1 × 15,4 cm
donated by A.K. Misra
MAP 12230

Night meeting of Lord Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā at the lotus pond
India, Rajasthan, before 1984
gouache on cotton fabric
30 × 22 cm
donated by Krishna Kumar Jajodia
MAP 7847



Emperor Shah Jahan in his harem by the fountain – an intrinsic element of palace architecture in the times of the Great Mughals
India, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
gouache and gilding on ivory
10,7 × 28,8 cm
donated by A.K. Misra
MAP 11700

Lady in the pavilion by the water
China, 1st half of the 20th c.
reverse glass painting
36,5 × 52 cm
MAP 19068

The monochrome reverse glass painting depicts a lady sitting in a pavilion on the shore of a lake among bamboo plants. The window of the pavilion shaped as a full moon was cut in such a way that it created an architectural framing for the figure of women sitting inside. This conscious compositional means is characteristic of Chinese garden art, in which the openings in walls and windows are designed to harmoniously inscribe into the surrounding landscapes.[34]
A Chinese garden is a meticulously designed space, embodying the pursuit of harmony with nature and reflecting the philosophical and artistic ideals of Chinese culture. It is a place of contemplation and spiritual communion with nature. Its structure combines elements such as rocks, water, plants and architecture, each imbued with rich literary and cultural symbolism. Such gardens were created as microcosms of nature – spaces that were supposed to evoke a sense of peace, beauty and inner balance.

34 Stewart R. Johnston, "Plany, idee i techniki," [in:] *Estetyka chińska. Antologi*a, Alina Zamanek, ed., Kraków, pp. 307-318.

SWIMMING

People initially dived underwater in order to hunt for food. Over time, they also learnt how to swim. Swimming was considered a skill necessary for survival and hunting, it was part of military training, but it also became a source of pleasure.

However, in some regions of Asia, contact with water was restricted because of cultural and religious conventions. In the Islamic tradition, modesty is an important aspect of culture, and this resulted in the invention of a burkini – an attire that covers almost the entire body and allows women to bathe and observe the rules of faith at the same time. It used to be quite different for sea nomads, such as the Bajau people of the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, who almost literally "lived in the water." There, even small children swam and dived, wearing their hand-made googles. In Oceania, the aquatic environment was part of everyday life. In many communities, children started swimming at a very young age and treated this activity as fun, as well as part of the local tradition. It was also there that the fastest swimming style – the crawl – was born.

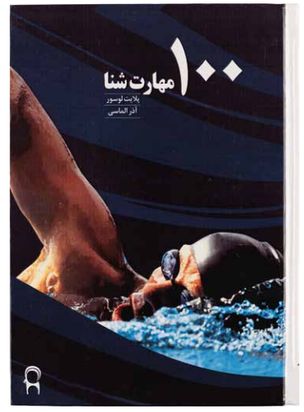
Diving goggles – *carumeng*
Malaysia, 2nd half of the 20th c.
wood, glass, rubber
4 × 14 × 21 cm
private collection

Handmade diving goggles, known locally as *carumeng*,[35] have been used by the Bajau people (known also as: Badjao, Bajaw, Badjau, Badjaw, etc.) – sea nomads inhabiting coastal areas of Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. For generations, Bajau communities have lived a life closely connected to the sea, living on boats and spending many hours a day underwater. Their unique diving skills also stem from physiological adaptations, such as an enlarged spleen that allows them to hold their breath longer during the dive. *Carumeng* diving googles do not only serve as a tool used at work. They are also a symbol of culture and tradition, reflecting the deep connection of the Bajau people to the sea and their ability to survive in a harsh aquatic environment.
They are mainly used when diving in search of food, fish, shellfish and other aquatic creatures that constitute the basis of Bajau's daily cuisine, as well as the source of livelihood of the community.

35 Dinis Cahyaningrum, "Community Empowerment Based Local Wisdom in Tourism of Bajo Community, Wakatobi," in: *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 2017, vol. 6(11), pp. 196–201.

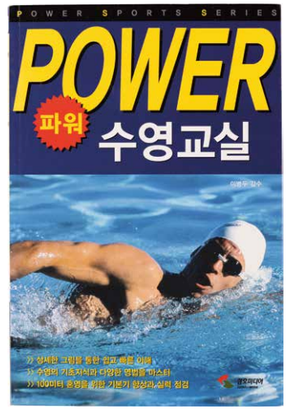
Burkini swimsuit
Indonesia, 2016
synthetic fabric
suit: 135 × 62 cm; swimming cap: 36 × 41 cm
MAP 20971

An Illustrated Guide to Swimming Techniques, 游泳技巧图解
Yutaka Yoshimura, Yusuke Takahashi, translated by Bian Jing, Li Xiang, Jia Chaobo, University of Physical Education Publishing House
China, Beijing, 1999
private collection

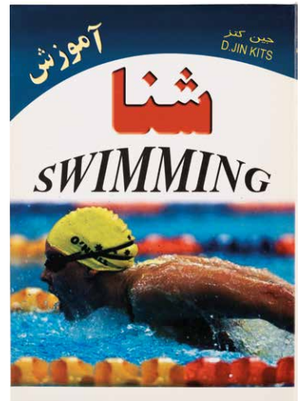


The 100 Best Swimming Drills, ان‌ش نی‌رم‌ت دص
Blythe Lucero, translated by Azar Almasi, published by Nashr-e Nariman
Iran, Tehran, 2019
private collection

Developing Swimmers, نارگان‌ش ثرورپ
Michael Brooks, translated by Behzad Mehdi Khazayan, edited by Farhad Moradi Shahr, published by Hatmi Publishing Gro
private collection



Power: Swimming Strength Training, Power: 파워 수영교실
by Lee Byung-doo, published by Samho Media
South Korea, Seoul, 2002
private collection



The Aquatic Handbook for Lifetime Fitness, ان‌ش ثرزوم‌ا
Jane Katz, translated by Jamileh Sadeghi, published by Danesh Publishing
Iran, Tehran, 2002
private collection

Swimming for Everyone, 誰でも上達する水泳
Edited by Yūichirō Sasaki, published by Seibido Shuppan
Japan, Tokyo, 2022
private collection

FAUNA AND FLORA

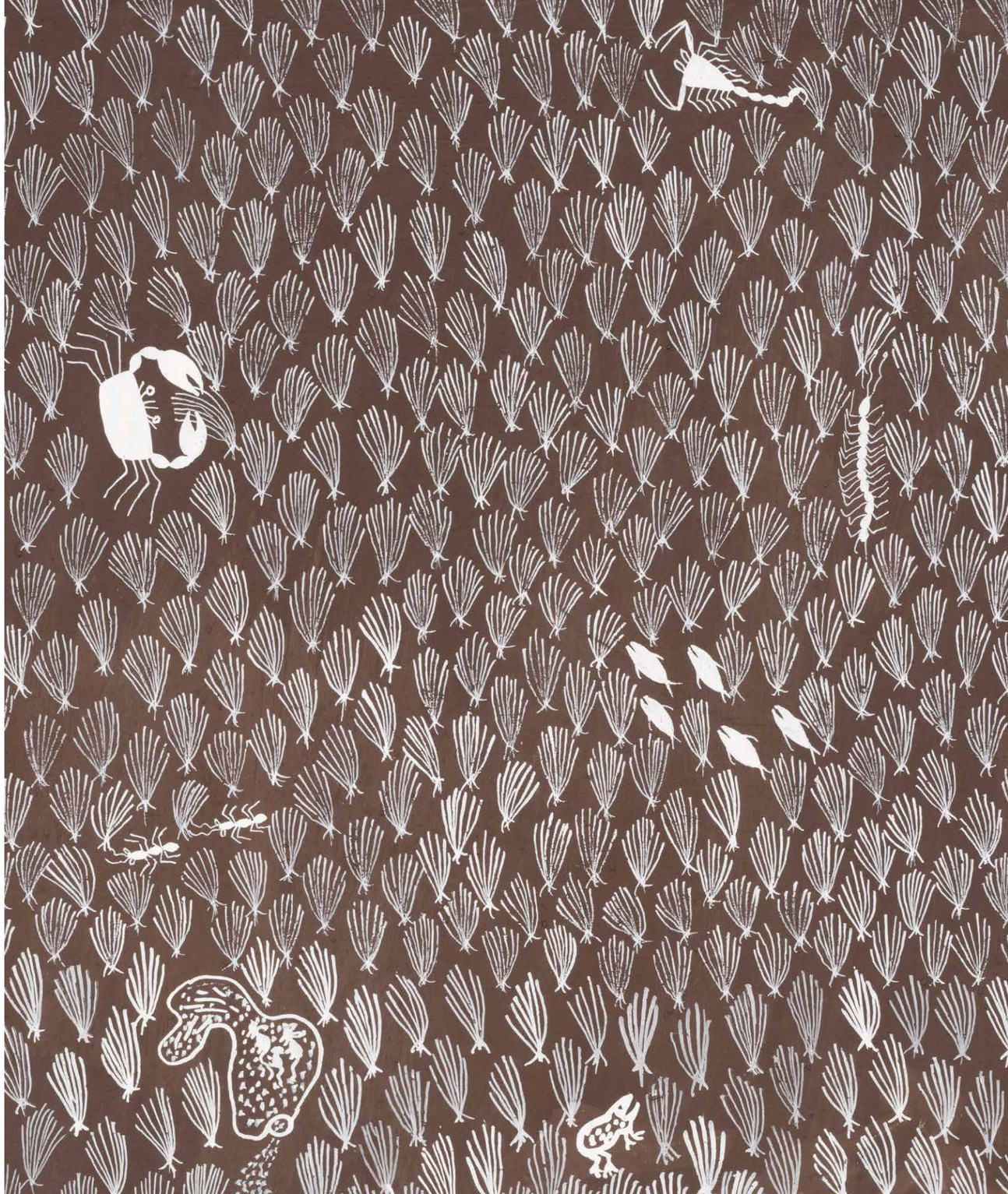
Asia is known for aquatic animals that can be found only in its specific regions – they include various species of river dolphins, sea turtles, crab and coral. However, many of these species are endangered by pollution and excessive hunting, as well as harvesting them for the purposes of jewellery and ornament production.

The cultures of Asia and Oceania are also rich in mythical animals associated with water, such as rain-bringing dragons, being the symbols of strength, good fortune, power and living in harmony with nature, or the *makara*, a mythical sea creature often depicted as a hybrid of a fish, an elephant and a crocodile or lion, which symbolises protection and prosperity.

IN CULTURE

Aquatic animals and plants are important motifs in both art and cultures of Asia and Oceania. They often fulfil decorative and symbolic functions. Sometimes, these two intertwine.

There are also universal symbols, present in many – often very different – cultures and religions. One of such symbols is a fish. In China, it stands for abundance. In the same context, it also functions in India, Iran or Vietnam. Another motif commonly known across extensive geographical regions is a lotus plant that grows out of muddy waters, but its flower remains pure and beautiful. It serves as a symbol of perfection and divinity.



Pustaha manuscript box in the shape of naga
(mythological water serpent)
Indonesia, Bali, 1st half of the 19th c.
polychromed wood, plant fibre
25 × 63 × 10 cm
MAP 18489

Full moon, carp and lotuses – symbols
of prosperity and good fortune
Workshop in Hang Trong St., Hanoi (producer)
Vietnam, Hanoi, the 1960s
woodcut on paper
42 × 26 cm
donated by Krzysztof Findziński
MAP 21336

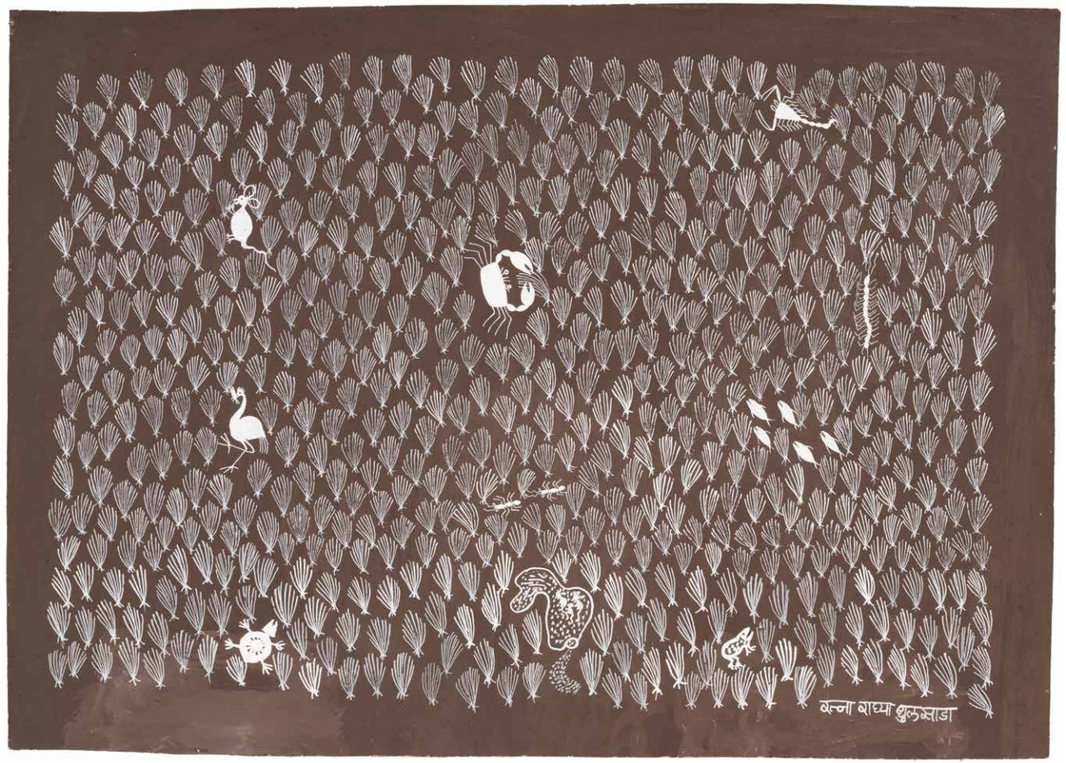
Turtle
Indonesia, Java, Yogyakarta, 2nd half
of the 20th c.
stone
31 × 60 × 50 cm
MAP 18621

Plate with a carp – a symbol of prosperity
China or Vietnam, 1st half of the 20th c.
cobalt underglaze painted porcelain,
overglaze painted
4,3 × 25 cm
donated by Krzysztof Findziński
MAP 21180

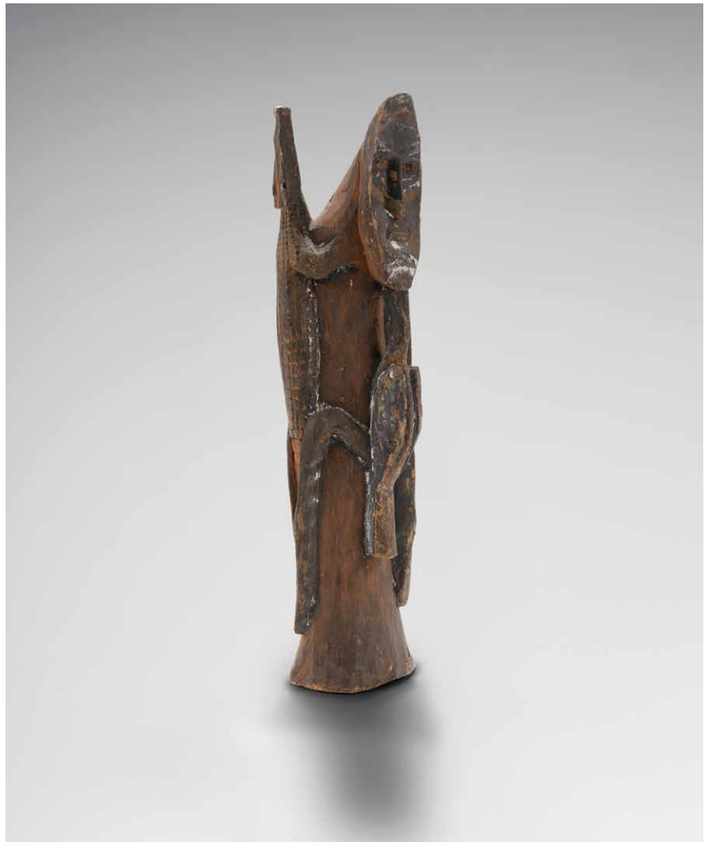
Wayang kulit shadow theatre puppet –
a crocodile
Indonesia, Java, Kediri, 1st half of the 20th c.
polychromed buffalo leather, wood
30 × 55 cm
donated by Andrzej Wawrzyniak
MAP 1062

A crocodile can be found in puppet sets used in the Javanese shadow theatre (*wayang kulit*). The puppets are made of openwork-cut buffalo leather, then mounted on wooden or buffalo horn rods and colourfully painted. Among the animal figures, apart from the crocodile, we can also find an elephant, a tiger and a horse.
In Indonesia, the crocodile is one of the characters of an immensely popular story about *kancil* – a clever mouse-deer. It is presented in a variety of shadow theatre plays called *wayang kancil*. *Kancil* (mouse-deer) embarks on different adventures, in which he manages to defeat much bigger and stronger animals, such as the crocodile, thanks to his intelligence, resourcefulness and cunning approach.

Fabric – *batik* with depictions of fish
Indonesia, Java, 1st half of the 20th c.
stamped *batik* (*cap*), cotton
230 × 106 cm
MAP 3580



Stworzenia wodne mieszkające na polu ryżowym
Ratna Raghya Dhulsada
Indie, Maharasztra, Warli, lata 80. XX w.
farby wodne na papierze
27,1 × 37,9 cm
podarował A. K. Misra
MAP 11601



Przodek z krokodylem, nieodłącznym elementem życia mieszkańców dorzecza Sepiku
Papua Nowa Gwinea, Sepik Wschodni, 1950–1981
drewno polichromowane
55 × 13 × 14 cm
MAP 6476

Region rzeki Sepik jest jednym z największych systemów rzecznych na świecie[37].
Jego mieszkańcy koegzystują z największymi słodko- i słonowodnymi krokodylami, których siedliska znajdują się właśnie w dorzeczu Sepiku. Krokodyle pojawiają się więc w lokalnych wierzeniach, przedstawiane są w rzeźbach i na obrazach. Stanowią nierozerwalny element ich życia, symbolizują płodność i siłę oraz według wierzeń podtrzymują wyspy pływające na rzece Sepik .

37 Ze względu na długość (ok. 1126 km) i zlewnię o powierzchni ponad 80 tys. km². Jest największy na Papui-Nowej Gwinei oraz siódmy pod względem długości i powierzchni na świecie. Zob. *Sistema Ferrocarril Pte. Carlos Antonio López*, World Heritage Convention. UNESCO, https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/506 (dostęp: 1.09.2025).

God Varuṇa on a crocodile – the god of waters, seas and oceans
Myanmar/Burma, 2nd half of the 20th c.
wood, lacquerware, glass, gilding, encrusting
28,5 × 94 × 28 cm
MAP 19597

In general, the version of Buddhism mainly practiced in Myanmar is called Theravāda ("School of the Elders"). Nevertheless, the local pantheon also includes some Hindu gods, along with god-like spirits that are worshiped specifically there and are called *nats*.
Since the early Vedic times, God Varuṇa has been worshipped as the lord of all waters and a judge who was especially implacable in punishing false swearing and lies.
The right outstretched hand means that Varuṇa sees the future. In his left hand (here empty), there are fetters (Sanskrit: *paśa*) in the shape of a rope loop – his attribute of a judge or, at times, a vessel with medicines, as it is believed that Varuṇa cures diseases.
Its mythical mount is a crocodile or *makara* – an aquatic, hybrid creature which combines a crocodile's body with an elephant's trunk.

Boy holding a fish – a symbol of prosperity
China, Hubei, Fu Tu, 2001
cut out of crêpe paper, aquarelle
7,8 × 9,3 cm
MAP 19103

The presented colourful cut-out made of delicate crêpe paper is an example of traditional Chinese New Year's wishes. The central figure of the composition is a child – a boy, symbolising the desire to have descendants, especially sons. He is holding a *yú* fish in his hands; the name of this fish in Chinese sounds similar to the word meaning "wealth" or "abundance." In traditional pictures of this type, flowers and lotus leaves often appear as separate images next to the boy with the fish. In this case, the tail of the fish smoothly turns into the shape of a large *lián* lotus leaf, the pronunciation of which is similar to the word meaning "continuity" or "uninterrupted continuation."
Therefore, the juxtaposition of these elements expresses a symbolic wish: a life full of abundance experienced every year and fulfilment in the form of descendants. This is quite a typical message for Chinese New Year's iconography, deeply rooted in folk beliefs and linguistic symbolism.[1]

38 Lin Shijian, ed., *Chinese Motifs in Contemporary Design*, Hong Kong, 2017.

Fish and flowers in the aquarium – a symbol of prosperity
China, Hubei, Fu Tu, 2001
cut out of crêpe paper, aquarelle
9,5 × 7,2 cm
MAP 19130

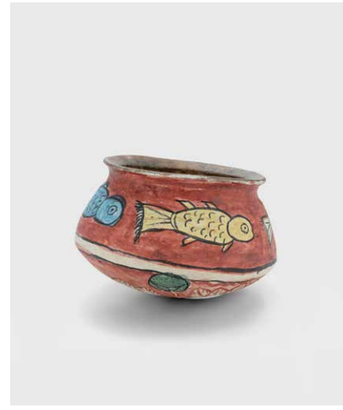
"Sea creatures" (Indo-Pacific sailfish, octopus and coral reef fish)
Alphonse Kauage
Papua New Guinea, Simbu, Kundiawa, 2001
acrylic on textile
90 × 65 cm
MAP 19019

The painting represents a genre of painting developed mainly by Mathias Kauage (1944–2003), the most important artist in the history of contemporary art in Papua New Guinea, the older brother of the author of the work described. The works by both of them, as well as other artists from their circles, are painted with acrylic on canvas and are characterised by their intense colours. The themes they address oscillate around modern technologies and the clash of the traditional and modern worlds. They refer to local customs, depict people wearing traditional costumes and ornaments, engaged in everyday activities. One of the topics of these works is the human environment.
In the case of the presented painting, the author focused on marine animals, among which the central place is occupied by two Indo-Pacific sailfish, considered to be the fastest swimming fish in the world.

Khaden rug with lotus flowers – symbols of purity, creative power and wisdom
Tibet, 20th c.
wool, cotton
200 × 121,5 cm
MAP 14987

Hand-woven rug decorated with lotus flowers and plant scrolls. In Tibet, these kinds of rugs are used for sitting and sleeping and not walking on them. They are used both by monks in monasteries and by ordinary people.
The lotus plant, resembling a water lily but with leaves protruding above the surface rather than floating on it, grows in silt and blooms above water. In Buddhism, it is a symbol of purity, divinity and creational powers. That is why in various artworks, Buddhas and bodhisattvas are depicted sitting on lotus flowers as if on thrones. Moreover, this plant symbolises wisdom and purity and is a frequent decorative motif.

Stamp used for printing fabrics – fish
India, Uttar Pradesh, near Kanpur,
before 1984
wood, copper
MAP 8345
3 × 7,7 × 9 cm
donated by a group of donors from Bombay
MAP 8345

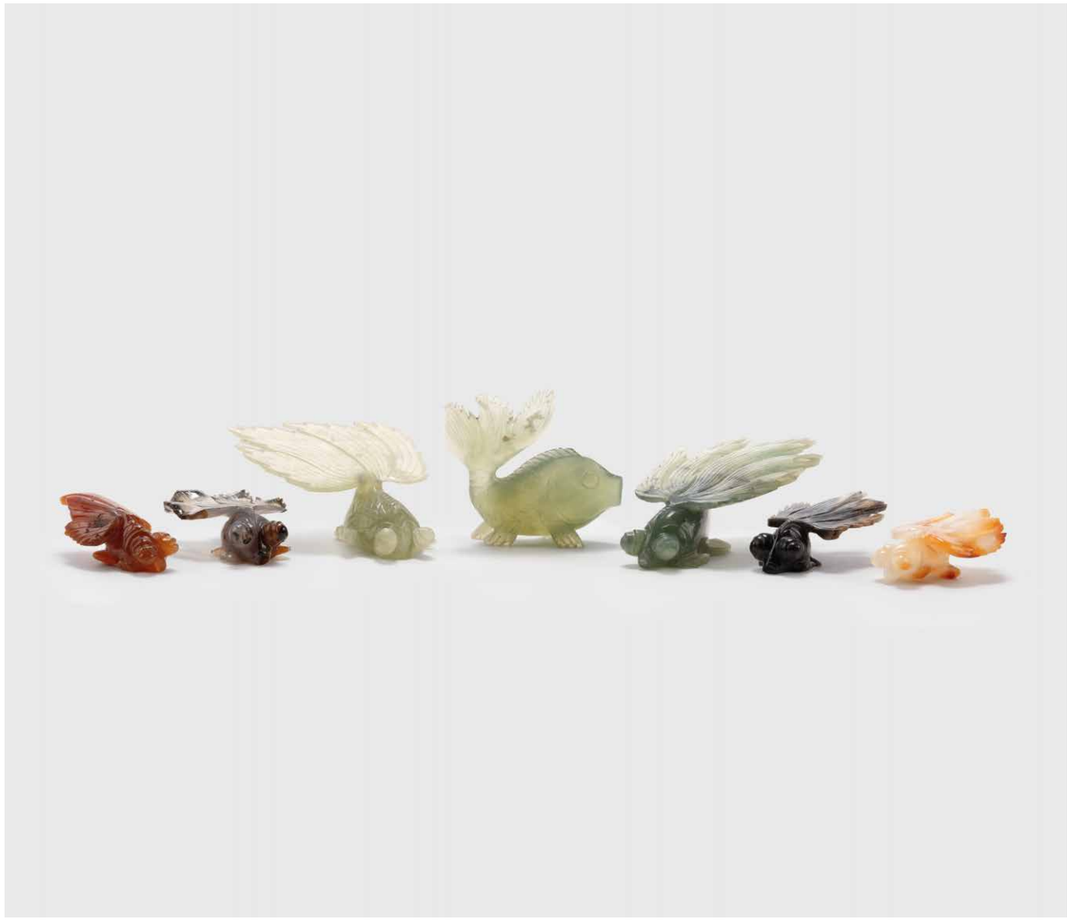


Bowl with images of fish
India, West Bengal, the 1970s
wheel throwing clay, watercolours
11,5 × 19 × 20 cm
MAP 4767

Mythical creature – Pyinsarupa
Myanmar/Burma, 1st half of the 20th c.
wood, gilded lacquerware
35 × 89 × 18 cm
MAP 20165

Yokthe pwe theatre puppet – mythical *naga* (water serpent)
Myanmar/Burma, Mandalay, 2nd half of the 20th c.
wood, gilded and glass-encrusted lacquerware, fabric embroidered with metal-braided thread, metal spangles
28 × 90 × 12,5 cm
MAP 19768

Turtle-shaped money box
India, Odisha, Bardamb, before 1983
brass, dhokra casting using the lost-wax technique
7,8 × 10,5 × 13,9 cm
donated by Escorts Ltd, a company from Calcutta
MAP 7157



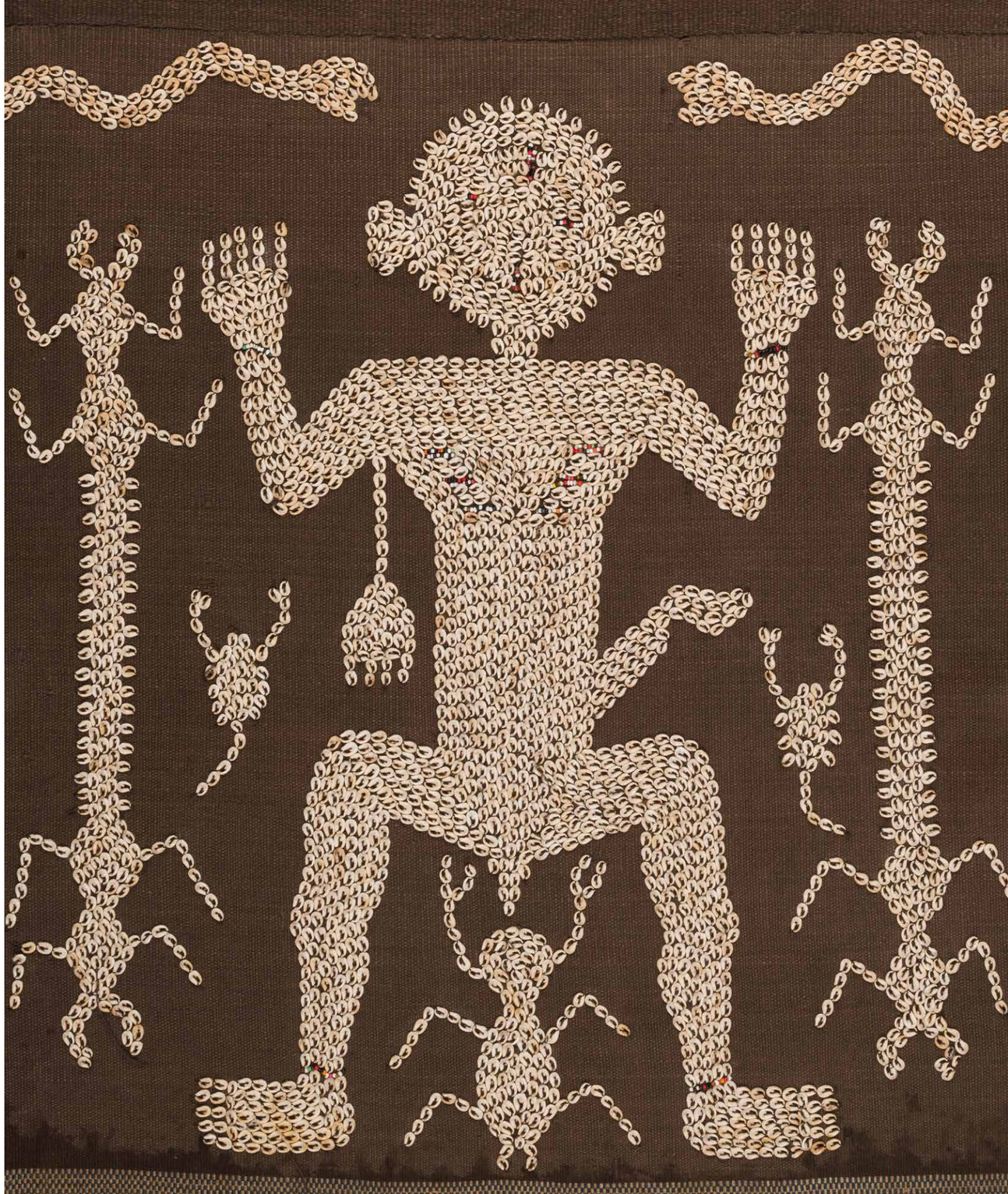
Fish
Vietnam, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
jades
4 × 10 × 6,5 cm
DEP 2601
3 × 6,5 × 4 cm
DEP 2603
2 × 6 × 3,5 cm
DEP 2602
9 × 8,5 × 4 cm
DEP 2605
2,5 × 6 × 4 cm
DEP 2606
2,5 × 4,5 × 7 cm
DEP 2607

Hem of the tin skirt with images of mythical *nagas* (water serpents) and fish
the Nam Mat River Valley, Xiangkhuang,
2nd half of the 20th c.
cotton fabric, brocaded (*ta muk*), embroidery
35,5 × 127 cm
MAP 14649

Crab
Hu Jigao
China, the 1970s – the 1980s
ink on paper
33,5 × 94 cm
DEP 330

ENDANGERED BEAUTY

For centuries, materials originating in the sea, such as coral, tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl, shells or pearls, have been used to create and decorate luxury items: jewellery, ornaments, dishes, furniture and other artistic products. Their unique, inimitable beauty added prestige to objects. Today, the exploitation of marine resources is resulting in serious ecological threats. Extensive hunting, fishing, and harvesting, along with the destruction of coral reefs and illegal sourcing for tortoiseshell from endangered species of sea turtles results in the degradation of entire aquatic ecosystems.



Lau hada wuti kau fabric – ceremonial attire worn by women
Indonesia, Lesser Sunda Islands, Sumba, ca. 1985
cotton fabric embroidered with shells (cowries) and beadwork
110 × 62 cm
MAP 22057

The *Lau hada wuti kau* fabrics were worn as ceremonial attire only by women of the aristocratic background and were produced by them. Such fabrics were always dark-coloured and decorated with laborious, sophisticated embroidery with shells and beads.
All the embroidered patterns were loaded with symbolic meanings.
The presented example depicts a human figure with raised arms and feet wide apart.

A machete – *parang* – is sticking out from behind the figure's back, and there is a bag with *betel* (stimulant) hanging from under the figure's arm. The eyes, lips, bracelets on the wrists and ankles are embroidered with colourful beads. Scholars are not unanimous about the identification of the depicted person and the symbolism. Some believe that they may be ancestors, founders of particular clans.
The figure is surrounded by animals associated with water – a crayfish and two snakes – and along both sides of the fabric, three animals were embroidered, probably insects or crustaceans.
Such fabrics are made only on the east coast of Sumba.

Necklace
India, before 1978
shells (cowries), seeds, nylon string
16,3 × 6,2 cm
donated by Alicja Chęcińska-Łukasik
MAP 4824

Necklace
French Polynesia, Tahiti (?), 1950–1989
shells from the family Cassidae and Cardiidae, synthetic string
20 × 6,5 × 3 cm
donated by Edward Obertyński
MAP 12479

Tabua – ceremonial object
Fiji, 3rd quarter of the 20th c.
sperm whale's tooth, plant fibre
42 × 15 × 5 cm
donated by Nicolai Michoutouchkine
MAP 3246

Tabua is a polished tooth of a sperm whale with a thick, braided cord made of coconut fibre attached to it. In Fiji, it is considered an object of great power and ceremonial significance. It has been traditionally offered in various intentions, symbolised marriage and served as a payment for the bride.
In the past, the gifting of *tabua* constituted an important part of local culture and the recipient was bound by tradition to honour the accompanying request. [39] *Tabuas* were also believed to possess mystical power (*mana*), which made them much more potent than any other object offered during the ceremony. Outside the context of rites, *tabuas* are considered ordinary, though valuable objects. They can be freely passed from hand to hand, stored, given to someone who needs them for an upcoming ceremony, etc. In some regions of Fiji, they are even bought and sold in shops or pawnshops, and thus they pass from one owner to another without any special ceremony.[40]

Fortunately, the use of sperm whale's teeth for ceremonial purposes has not affected the population of these animals. Fijians have been extracting teeth from the bodies of dead individuals washed ashore by the sea.[41] One sperm whale has between 40 and 52 teeth. Other parts of its body have not been used.

39 Kirk Razga, *Tabua and Whale Tooth Ornaments from Fiji*, Australian Museum, 15.04.2019, https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/pacific-collection/melanesian/tabua-whale-tooth-ornaments-fiji/ (access: 1.09.2025).

40 Andrew Arno, "'Cobo' and 'Tabua' in Fiji: Two Forms of Cultural Currency in an Economy of Sentiment," in: *American Ethnologist, 2005*, vol. 32(1), p. 55.

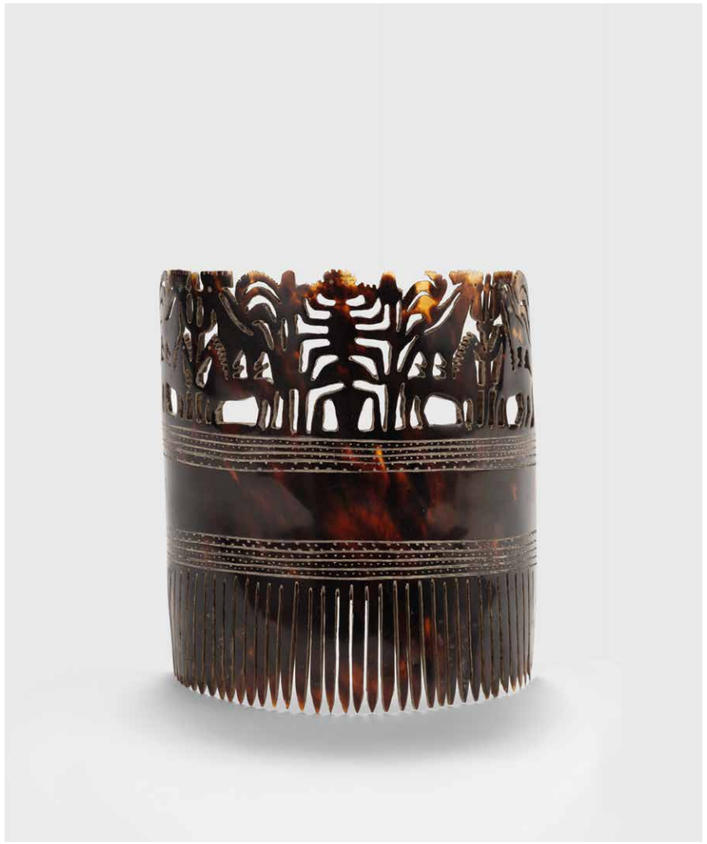
41 Paul Van Der Grijp, "Tabua Business: Re-Circulation of Whale Teeth and Bone Valuables in the Central Pacific," in: *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 2007, vol. 116(3), p. 346.

Mwali armband
Papua New Guinea, Trobriand Islands,
3rd quarter of the 20th c.
shells, plant fibre
7,8 × 17,5 × 2,7 cm
MAP 4866

The *mwali* armbands made of Conus *millepunctatus* shells are produced by breaking off the top and the narrow end of the shell and then polishing the ring created in this way. 90% of the armbands, however, are too small to wear. They primarily constitute ritual objects and are used in an exchange called *kula*, which is the exchange of gifts between men who have established relations with each other. There are two types of items that are the subjects of exchange: *soulava* necklaces made of red shells and *mwali* armbands made of white shells. Necklaces circulate between the islands clockwise, while armbands circulate in the opposite direction. The exchange consists in giving the partner an item of the same value. In this way, people, families, villages or even entire islands establish mutual relationships.
The parties of such an exchange become partners for life, and objects remain in a constant circulation, as they should not be kept by one person for too long. This tradition grants everyone allies and a place to stay on their journey. The exchange has social, economic, legal, religious and even psychological significance.

Ceremonial conch – *śaṅkha*
Nepal, 20th/21st c.
Turbinella pyrum shell, brass, imitations of turquoise and corals, stamping, engraving
20 × 12,3 × 6,5 cm
MAP 20543

A conch – called *śaṅkha* in Sanskrit – is a shell of a sea snail and constitutes an important symbol in both Hinduism and Buddhism. It has served as a vessel for making water offerings, as a signalling musical instrument used in rituals and formerly also on battlefields; when powdered, it is treated as a medication in Ayurvedic medicine, and it has also been used to make bracelets and ornaments for elephants' foreheads. In Hinduism, it is an attribute of Lord Viṣṇu and his earthly incarnation – God Kṛṣṇa.
In Buddhism, it is one of the eight auspicious symbols. As an instrument, it was used in monasteries to summon monks for religious ceremonies. Its sound symbolically bears the name of Buddha and reminds us of enlightenment.
There are different types of conch shells. Those with engraved metal fittings inlaid with turquoise and coral are popular among Tibetans.



Decorative comb
Indonesia, Lesser Sunda Islands,
East Sumba, ca. 1970
tortoiseshell
15 × 13,5 × 6,5 cm
MAP 22063

The decorative comb is made of tortoiseshell. Its upper part was ornamented with openwork cut-out motifs. In its central part, there is an elongated, tall figure – perhaps symbolizing an ancestor. On its sides, there are two horses with their heads facing each other; each has a rooster on its back.
Representations of horses and roosters are often part of objects made by the inhabitants of Sumba, for whom the horse is a symbol of prosperity.

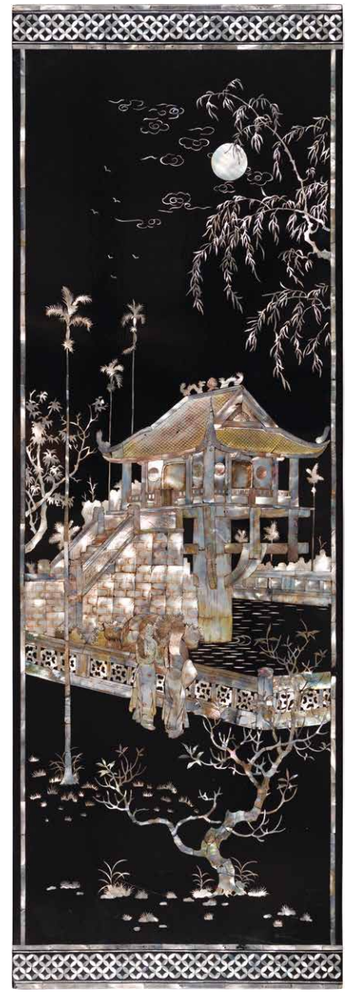
Such combs were worn by women on their heads as finery. They were adjusted in a certain manner – their upper part was supposed to protrude above the head and look like a crown.
The combs were made of tortoise shells, and thus scut plates covering the shell of a hawksbill sea turtle. Due to its beautiful colour, this exclusive and expensive material was popular in many regions of the world, which unfortunately contributed to the killing of turtles in order to obtain it. Currently, the hawksbill sea turtle is considered a critically endangered species.

Khavchaar hair clip
Mongolia, 18th–19th c.
silver, river pearls, turquoise, engraving, filigree, gilding
2,2 × 3,2 × 1,4 cm
MAP 6005

Mongolian women used to wear a lot of jewellery, including various hair clips. Small, oval clips were used to hold the ends of the braids of young women and girls. Mongolian jewellery was mainly made of silver and precious stones, and above all of corals and turquoise. Local river pearls, much cheaper than the also popular ocean pearls imported from China, were much appreciated in Mongolia. If they were used to produce a piece of jewellery, they were used abundantly, as they were quite insignificant in size. They are smaller than pearls produced by saltwater organisms, rarely exceeding 1 cm in length. They also come in various shapes, such as balls, tears and grains of rice.

Hair clip
Mongolia, 2nd half of the 20th c.
silver, corals, repoussé, filigree
10,2 × 2,0 × 2,6 cm
MAP 7231

Spoon and fork
Philippines, 1st half of the 20th c.
mother-of-pearl, brass, lacquerware, encrusting
19 × 4,5 cm (both pieces)
donated by Brygitta and Wawrzyniec Węclewiczowie
MAP 6521/1–2



One Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi
Vietnam, 2nd half of the 20th c.
lacquer on wood, encrusted with mother-of-pearl
120 × 40 cm
MAP 10108

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arno, Andrew, "Cobo and Tabua in Fiji: Two Forms of Cultural Currency in an Economy of Sentiment," in: *American Ethnologist*, 2005 vol. 32(1), pp. 46–62.

Beer, Robert, *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, Chicago: Serindia Publications, 1999.

Birmingham, Judy, "Traditional Potters of the Kathmandu Valley: An Ethnoarchaeological Study," in: *Man*, 1975, vol. 10(3), pp. 370–386.

Cahyaningrum, Dinis, "Community Empowerment Based Local Wisdom in Tourism of Bajo Community, Wakatobi," in: *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research*, 2017, vol. 6(11), pp. 196–201.

Catalogue of the Tibetan Collection and Other Lamaist Articles in the Newark Museum, vol. 2: *Prayer and Objects Associated with Prayer*, Newark, Jew Jersey: Newark Museum, 1973.

Dimmitt, Cornelia, Buitenen, Johannes Adrianus Bernardus van, eds., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978.

Dinerman, Ina, R., "Iatmul Art as Iconography (New Guinea)," in: *Anthropos*, 1981, vol. 76(5/6), pp. 807–824.

Dwivedi, Bhoomika, "Classical Music in the Rajasthani Folk Tradition: The *Langa–Manganiar* Music," in: *IIS University Journal of Arts*, 2022, vol. 10(3), pp. 429–43.

Dżonka Chińska – dalekowschodni statek czy może rupieć, 2.10.2023, https://zagle.org/statki-dzonka-chinska/ [access: 1.09.2025].

Grijp, Paul, Van Der, "Tabua Business: Re-Circulation of Whale Teeth and Bone Valuables in the Central Pacific," in: *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 2007, vol. 116(3), pp. 341–356.

Gyul, Elmira, *Art Encyclopedia: Terms related to the traditional art of Uzbekistan*, Tashkent: The World Society for the Study, Preservation and Popularization of the Cultural Legacy of Uzbekistan 2023.

Gyul, Elmira, "Rishtan 'ducks' – utility, magic and beauty," in: *Rishtan ceramics*, Tashkent: The World Society for the Study, Preservation and Popularization of the Cultural Legacy of Uzbekistan, 2021.

Hurley, Michael, *Waterways of Bangkok: Memory and Landscape* [doctoral dissertation], Irvine: University of California, 2015.

In Memoriam: Srihadi Sudarsono, Epoch-Defining Modernist of Indonesian Art, Sotheby's, 23.04.2022, https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/in-memoriam-srihadi-sudarsono-epoch-defining-modernist-of-indonesian-art [access: 1.09.2025].

Johnston, Stewart R., "Plany, idee i techniki," translated by Zemanek, Bogdan, in: *Estetyka chińska. Antologia*, Zamanek, Adina, ed., Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2007, pp. 307–318.

Kerber, Anna, "Stany transowe w wybranych obrzędach i rytuałach współczesnej Bali," in: *W cieniu przodków. Obrzędy społeczności Indonezji i Birmy*, vol. 1: *Paralele: folklor, literatura, kultura*, Toruń: Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013.

Nagata, Seiji, *Hokusai: Genius of the Japanese Ukiyo-e*, Tokyo: Kondasha, 1999.

Ramos, Imma, "'*Private Pleasures' of the Mughal Empire*," in: *Art History*, 2014, vol. 37(3), pp. 408–427.

Randhawa, Mohinder Singh, *Kangra Paintings on Love*, Delhi: National Museum, 1994.

Razga, Kirk, *Tabua and whale tooth ornaments from Fiji*, Australian Museum, 15.04.2019, https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/pacific-collection/melanesian/tabua-whale-tooth-ornaments-fiji/ [access: 1.09.2025].

Savage-Smith, Emilie, "Safavid Magic Bowls," in: *Hunt for Paradise: Court Arts of Safavid Iran, 1505–1576*, Thompson, John, Canby, Sheila R., eds., Milan: Skira, 2003, pp. 240–247.

Self-Portrait as a Fisherman – Katsushika Hokusai, https://www.wikiart.org/en/katsushika-hokusai [access: 1.09.2025].

Shijian, Lin, ed., *Chinese Motifs in Contemporary Design*, Hong Kong: Sendpoints Publishing, 2017.

Singh, Baldev, *Malay Brassware: A Guide to the Collections*, Singapore: National Museum of Singapore 1985.

Sistema Ferrocarril Pte. Carlos Antonio López, World Heritage Convention. UNESCO, https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/506 [access: 1.09.2025].

Subekti, Muhlis Huda, *Tradisi Kuras Sendang Angin-angin Padukuhan Guwo*, 10.10.2023, https://triwidadi.bantulkab.go.id/first/artikel/759-Tradisi-Kuras-Sendang-Angin-angin-Padukuhan-Guwo [access: 25.09.2025].

Sullivan, Michael, "Kendi," in: *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America*, 1957, vol. 11, pp. 40–58.

Szykulski, Józef, *Starożytne Peru*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego 2010.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Part IV, Delhi: Motilal Bandarsidass, 2002, 24–25.

The Royal Barge Procession, Bangkok Post, https://www.bangkokpost.com/specials/royal-barge-procession/2019/ [access: 31.07.2025].

The Skanda-Purāṇa, Part VI, Delhi: Motilal Bandarsidass, 1998, II.iv.13.24–55.

Thomas, Nicholas, Brunt, Peter, eds., *Oceania*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018.

Tingsanchali, Ch., "Royal Barge Procession in Thailand," in: *The South East Asian Review*, 2020/2021, vol. 45/46, pp. 119–129.

Williams, Charles Alfred Speed, Barrow, Terence, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Tokyo, Rutland, Vermont, Singapore: Tuttle Pubublishing, 2018.

THE MANY FACES OF WATER IN THE CULTURES OF ASIA AND OCEANIA

Authors
Dr. Barbara Banasik, Dr. Magdalena Ginter-Frołow, Joanna Karmasz, Karolina Krzywicka, Tomasz Madej, Dr. Krzysztof Morawski, Dr. Maria Szymańska-Ilnata
Advisors: Artur Fonżychowski (National Maritime Museum in Gdańsk), Dominika Kossowska-Janik, Marta Utratna-Żukowska (Warsaw University of Life Sciences), Izabella Wichniarz, Dr. Rafał Wieczorek (Institute of Biochemistry, University of Warsaw), Dr. Eng. Michał Wasilewicz (Warsaw University of Life Sciences)

Translation
Aleksandra Szymczyk

Graphic design, layout and print design
Barbara Bugalska

Photography
Łukasz Brodowicz

Photo editing
Konrad Dobrucki, Square Format

ISBN 978-83-65160-22-5

Publisher:
The Andrzej Wawrzyniak
Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw
24 Solec St., 00-403 Warszawa
www.muzeumazji.pl

MUZEUM AZJI I PACYFIKU

Substantive support:

SZKOŁA GŁÓWNA GOSPODARSTWA WIEJSKIEGO

Warsaw University of Life Sciences, Faculty of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Institute of Environmental Engineering

Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego

Co-financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage from the Culture Promotion Fund

Mazowsze. serce Polski

Co-financed by the Funds of the Self-Government of the Mazowieckie Voivodeship

Muzeum jest jednostką organizacyjną Samorządu Województwa Mazowieckiego

PARTNERS

Zarząd Zieleni m.st. Warszawy
WISŁA
SZKOŁA GŁÓWNA GOSPODARSTWA WIEJSKIEGO
wodociągi warszawskie
pah Polska Akcja Humanitarna

MEDIA PATRONS

TVP3
POLSKIE RADIO RDC
MUZEON.PL