Introduction

At the heart of the Museum Nasional in Jakarta lies a remarkable collection of ancient sculpture. One after another, dozens of Hindu and Buddhist statues line the walls of the courtyard at the core of the building, giving the visitor a glimpse of the long artistic history of the region. Although many of the images are spectacular, when I first visited the museum, I found myself drawn again and again to the same two: an exquisite seated image of Prajñāpāramitā, the goddess of transcendental wisdom, and a colossal standing demonic figure known as a bhairava.

The bhairava sculpture is impossible to miss and difficult to forget (fig. i.1). It stands at the back of the first gallery of ancient sculpture, looking out at the museum’s courtyard. At almost four and a half meters high, it towers over the rest of the museum’s collection. Standing on a base of oversized human skulls, the bhairava holds a dagger and skull cup against his hairy chest. A small Aksobhya Buddha depicted in his headdress is the only clue to the image’s Buddhist nature. The statue is described as a portrait of the fourteenth-century Sumatran king Ādityawarman.

The Prajñāpāramitā statue is equally riveting, but in a very different way (fig. i.2). While the bhairava image boldly faces the viewer, the Prajñāpāramitā looks down in meditation, serenely focused inward. The seated figure is on the second floor of the museum, guarding the entranceway of the Treasure Room. It is a jewel-like image, cool, hard, exquisite. Despite its clearly Buddhist iconography, the statue has long been associated with a historical figure known as Ken Dedes, the first queen of the Singasari dynasty.

What initially drew me to these two images was their remarkable craftsmanship. But soon other questions arose. What role did these sharply contrasting images play in Buddhist practices in Indonesia? What were the connections between East Java, where the female deity was found, and West Sumatra, where the colossal demonic figure was unearthed? Were these images really portraits of historical rulers?

The exploration of these questions led to a reexamination of some of the
FIGURE i.1. Bhairava, mid-fourteenth century, Padang Roco (Sungai Langsat), West Sumatra, h 4.14 m, Museum Nasional Indonesia, inv. no. 6470
FIGURE i.2. Prajñāpāramitā, ca. 1300, from Candi Singasari, East Java, h 1.26 m, Museum Nasional Indonesia, inv. no. 1403/X1 1587
most important issues faced by historians of ancient Indonesia. Many scholars have held that the religion of ancient Java during the Singasari and Majapahit dynasties (1222–ca. 1520) was a syncretic combination of Hinduism and Buddhism. Another common belief is that rulers during that period were regarded as deities. Many of the pieces of sculpture discussed in this book were used to bolster such arguments. But a closer look at the statuary, as well as at the inscriptions and literature of the time, indicates that these premises are false.

This book focuses on Indonesian Buddhist statuary, dating, for the most part, from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is not a comprehensive survey of the Buddhist works from this period, but rather a close examination of some of the most important stone statues of the Singasari and Majapahit dynasties. I also discuss Sumatran material that was made during roughly this same period, but not necessarily under the patronage of rulers of these two dynasties. The task of examining the Buddhist art of this period is somewhat facilitated by the fact that the number of clearly identifiable Buddhist works is limited. Yet the existing examples are truly impressive: as a whole, they show a remarkable level of craftsmanship and are also exceptionally expressive images, exhibiting a range of emotions from the serene to the ferocious.

Initially I set out to explore what ancient sculpture could tell us about Buddhism during this period, but I soon found it impossible to discuss these images without addressing the many ways that religious art functioned in a political arena. Although statues clearly represented Buddhist deities, they were often erected in commemoration of kings and queens and have been described as royal portraits. Some images were inscribed with long royal proclamations, and others were exchanged between realms.

These statues have continued to have meaning in the twenty-first century. Indonesian art historical studies often refer to important works of art as *pusaka*, a term that literally means “heirloom,” but that carries a connotation of an object with supernatural power. Images of many of the sculptures discussed in this book can be seen today on postage stamps, replicated in municipal museums and parks, and on the covers of catalogues of international exhibitions. Just as Buddhist images of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were used to emphasize the power and legitimacy of the regime, they are used by the Indonesian state today to create and reinforce a sense of national history and national pride, a task especially important at a time when the nation itself is bound together with tenuous threads.

In the Indonesian archipelago, the spread of Buddhism was primarily confined to the islands of Java and Sumatra. The majority of archaeological
Figure 1.3. Indonesia
remains from ancient Java have been Hindu, but significant Buddhist antiquities exist from both Central and East Java. Ancient Javanese art has long been divided into the two broad categories of Central and East Javanese art. These geographic terms also imply a chronological difference, with art flourishing in Central Java between the eighth and the tenth centuries and in East Java from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries. This division is obviously arbitrary and excludes important archaeological remains that do not fit into this geographic and chronological framework. The Javanese works discussed in this book all date from the East Javanese period.

During this period, religion in ancient Java, as suggested by both literature and statuary, began to display characteristics that indicate a movement away from earlier Central Javanese and Indian models. In literature, one finds repeated references that compare and conflate the Hindu and Buddhist deities. In sculpture, the iconography of some statues combines attributes that were previously associated with more than one deity. Scholars have pointed to both of these factors as evidence of religious syncretism in ancient Java. At the same time, one also finds an increase in the depiction of fierce deities and wrathful guardian figures.

The problem of determining the nature of religious developments in this
part of Indonesia is compounded by the fact that esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism can be difficult to differentiate, even in India. Rather than thinking of the religion of Java and Sumatra during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as Hindu or Buddhist, some scholars posit that it would be better categorized as tantric. Tantric religious practice placed great emphasis on the use of rituals, meditation, and other tools in the quest for immediate salvation.

In contrast to Java, the majority of ancient remains found in Sumatra are Buddhist. But far fewer Sumatran sculptures have been unearthed, and much less effort has been spent on the excavation of archaeological sites. All of the
major archaeological sites in Sumatra, including Muara Takus, Muara Jambi, Padang Lawas, and the Batang Hari region, remain in need of continued excavation and conservation. A more exhaustive study of the ancient remains of Sumatra can be written only after this archaeological work is undertaken.

While the temples of Java have provided fodder for the study of Buddhism on that island, the meanings of Sumatran antiquities have been much more difficult to decipher. The writings of Chinese pilgrims and the inscriptions of local rulers suggest that Buddhism was already flourishing in the seventh century at Śrīvijaya (an eastern Sumatran thalassocracy), yet much of our knowledge about the specifics of religious practice from that time onward is murky and conjectural.

Despite the long history of Buddhism on the island, most of the scholarship on the early history of Sumatra has focused on the question of the location of Śrīvijaya, rather than on the sociocultural or religious nature of the maritime supremacy. Other studies have associated Śrīvijaya with objects from all regions of Sumatra dating from the seventh to the fourteenth centuries, even though the connections between many of these works and the ancient kingdom are ambiguous. Neither the colonial nor the more recent Indonesian scholarship has concentrated specifically on the religious nature of temple complexes and of sculptural imagery. Nor have the connections between the art of Sumatra and the Buddhist art of Java been thoroughly explored.

Unfortunately, no large corpus of Buddhist texts exists to help us understand the religious practices in Indonesia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Our knowledge is gleaned mainly from one major tenth-century treatise, allusions to religion in literary works, inscriptions, and art. Previous research on the religious nature of sculpture of this period has emphasized the syncretism between Hinduism and Buddhism in Java and the connection between esoteric practices and indigenous beliefs in Sumatra. Some scholars theorize that tantric cults gained popularity in Sumatra because of the pre-existing local beliefs of the Batak and Minangkabau peoples. Yet a close examination of the relevant Buddhist sculpture shows that in many cases these emphases are unwarranted or exaggerated.

While Buddhism is the first factor that ties together the sculptures discussed in this study, a second focus is the political role of these images in ancient Indonesia and the many ways in which the spheres of religion and politics intersect. Some of these statues have long been associated with historical figures and have been described as portraits of rulers depicted as gods. Other images may have been used as palladia, established for purposes of legitimiza-
Fierce statues were erected in order to intimidate or threaten, protecting the ruler against treason from within or attack from afar.

In Java, the Singasari and Majapahit dynasties are considered a golden age in which Hindu and Buddhist arts and literature flourished, before the expansion of the Islamic coastal powers. Much of the Buddhist sculpture of this period is associated with King Kṛṭanagara (1268–1292), the last king of the Singasari dynasty. Epigraphic and literary sources indicate that Kṛṭanagara was a proponent of esoteric Buddhism, though the nature of the practices he engaged in is difficult to determine.

In Sumatra, the fourteenth century is associated with the rise of the kingdom of Malāyu after the decline of the elusive Buddhist polity of Śrīvijaya. King Ādityawarman stands out as one of the few historical rulers who has been identified from this period. The inscriptions he left in West Sumatra and along its borders provide us with valuable (though often perplexing) information about royal religious practices of the time. Ādityawarman is also associated with two of the most important late Buddhist statues found in Sumatra, an image of Amoghapāśa and the previously mentioned colossal bhairava statue discovered along the banks of the Batang Hari (now in the Museum Nasional Indonesia).

One commonly asserted premise is that much of the religious statuary of this period functioned as royal portraiture and thus illustrated the apotheoses of rulers. The question of royal divinity is a complicated issue. Robert Heine-Geldern’s seminal essay, “Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia,” argued that the structure of early Southeast Asian capital cities was modeled on the Buddhist or Hindu cosmology. This often included the idea of a sacred mountain surrounded by concentric circles of mountain ranges and moats. Implicit in this model was the equation of the god at the center of the macrocosm with the king in his temple at the center of his city. In this framework the realm was a microcosm of the universe, with the king perceived as god on earth. Working from this model, other scholars developed theories in which the Javanese candi served as a temple to the gods and a royal mausoleum simultaneously. This theory was especially expounded in East Java, where temples were built to commemorate deceased rulers. Statues of both Buddhist and Hindu deities would be consecrated in these temples; thus the ruler would be posthumously associated with a specific god.

More recently, the concept of divine kingship in Southeast Asia has been reexamined, and scholars have sought to determine to what extent royal claims of divinity were metaphorical. This research suggested that living kings
in Java were probably not the objects of religious cults. Kings and queens may have been considered avatars or semiavatars of gods, leading human existences on earth, then returning to their divine status after death. This belief would conform to indigenous ancestor cults found throughout the Indonesian archipelago. The connections between rulers and statues were complex, and while images may have been closely associated with a ruler, they did not necessarily attempt to imitate his or her physical features.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries one finds a predominance of two kinds of freestanding statuary: one showing fierce demonic gods, the other depicting divine figures who seem serenely lost in meditation. These two types of images are not portraits, but they do illustrate two aspects of an Indonesian conception of power. Old Javanese literature commonly describes three stages in the life of rulers. The first stage involves asceticism and the accumulation of power. The second stage involves a period of conflict and violence to gain and maintain control of the realm. The final stage is a retirement and return to the ascetic life.

From this scenario two very different conceptions of power emerge: one emphasizes restrained spiritual potency, the other unchecked physical might. One type of power is accumulated through disciplined asceticism and meditation, and another is unleashed violently in an effort to gain or maintain authority. Characters of these two kinds are routinely juxtaposed in literature and in wayang shadow plays. Admiration for both types can be seen in Javanese tales of Arjuna and Bima, two Mahābhārata heroes who exemplify these contrasting ideals. Statues of this period may illustrate and reflect these two types, or two aspects, of power. They can also be seen to depict two different methods of attaining power: through meditation or through more unorthodox tantric practices.

Another intersection between the religious and political spheres can be seen in the replication and distribution of Buddhist statuary during this period. Many of the images I will discuss were copied and, in some cases, transported hundreds of kilometers. In some cases the appearance of statues of the same deity in different locations may have been coincidental, but in others, there are clear political implications in their distribution. The Amoghapāśa mandala (a form of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and his surrounding attendants) from Candi Jago was replicated in both stone and bronze. While filial piety and the accumulation of religious merit were certainly two of the motivations for the duplication of the image, the expansionist politics of King Krtanagara also played a role. By examining the inscriptions relating to these works, as well as the depiction of the saptaratna (seven jewels of a monarch) on the base
of the image, one can see how the statue represents both a bodhisattva and a cakravartin (universal monarch).

Some of the most eloquent and influential recent studies on Indonesian culture have focused on exploring conceptions of power and realm. Most notably, the works of Clifford Geertz and Benedict Anderson have examined ideas of kingship, charisma, and legitimacy in Java. While their studies often concentrate on the status of modern Indonesian politics, they have also sought to define “traditional” notions of political authority. I am particularly interested in how Buddhist sculpture may have been used in a political context to define kingdoms, to negotiate between realms, or to gain legitimacy and authority.

The book begins with a brief discussion of the early history of Buddhism in Indonesia. The records of Chinese pilgrims provide some of the earliest information about the spread of Buddhism to the islands, but indigenous inscriptions are also an important source. A Malay inscription from the seventh century proclaims a Sumatran king’s bodhisattva vow, while other inscriptions (known as curse formulas) mention a wide range of esoteric tools used by rulers during this period (mantras, yantras [symbolic diagrams], and bowls full of blood). This early epigraphic evidence of religious practice is associated with the Sumatran maritime kingdom of Srivijaya, which is mentioned in the inscriptions. The royal concerns with accumulating merit and with safeguarding against treason expressed in these inscriptions resonate throughout later literature and art.

For people familiar with Southeast Asia, the mention of Buddhism in Java immediately calls to mind the Central Javanese monument of Borobudur, one of the largest Buddhist monuments in the world. Dozens of books have been written about the monument, and its complex structure and iconography certainly merit such attention. But the lack of scholarship on Buddhist art in Indonesia after the Sailendra dynasty would lead one to think that after a florescence in the Central Javanese period (eighth–tenth centuries), Buddhism was completely eclipsed by the predominantly Hindu East Javanese dynasties. Instead, as the works discussed in the chapters to follow illustrate, extraordinary Buddhist images were still being sculpted as late as the fourteenth century.

The following chapters discuss the most significant pieces of Buddhist statuary from East Java and Sumatra. Each chapter concentrates upon a specific statue (or group of statues) and examines the relevant larger issues evoked by the image. Chapter 2 discusses a rarely examined statue known by the nickname Joko Dolok. This seated figure combines the characteristics of a monk
with the attributes of the Akṣobhya Buddha. The only image that most scholars agree is a portrait, it is thought to depict King Kṛṣṇanagara, the last king of the Singasari dynasty and a famed proponent of esoteric Buddhism. This chapter explores the nature of religion in Java in the late thirteenth century, focusing on what we know about tantric practices and about the syncretism of Hinduism and Buddhism.

The following chapter concentrates on another image that has often been called a portrait statue, the famous Prajñāpāramitā from Singasari. This statue has been associated with two famous women in Indonesian history: Ken Dedes, the first queen of the Singasari dynasty, and the Rājapatnī, queen mother in the Majapahit dynasty. Several other statues of Prajñāpāramitā have been found both in Java and Sumatra. Do these depict other royal figures, or are they evidence of the widespread worship of the goddess in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? A reassessment of the question of portraiture in ancient Javanese art indicates that in most cases there is little evidence that statues were intended to resemble royal figures. Regardless of the artist’s original intent, the Prajñāpāramitā statue has assumed different identities for different audiences and continues to have deep significance in Indonesia today.

Chapter 4 focuses on a number of statues that depict the Buddhist deity Amoghapāśa and his attendants. These images are particularly interesting because we know that they were replicated and distributed. Bronze plaques depicting this bodhisattva were found in several sites in East Java, and a large stone statue of the deity was sent to Sumatra, where King Ādityawarman later rededicated it. In this chapter, I examine the meanings of the Amoghapāśa mandala, examining especially how this series of images became connected with notions of kingship. While the primary function of these images may have been as palladia of the realm, they were also used to legitimize kingship, to confer merit, and to record filial piety.

I remain in Sumatra in chapter 5 to discuss an image of Heruka that was found at the northern site of Padang Lawas. Although the iconography of the image is fairly standard, interesting questions are raised by the fact that the statue was deliberately smashed to pieces and subsequently lost. When discussing the art of Padang Lawas, scholars have often drawn connections between tantrism and the indigenous beliefs of the Batak people. This chapter examines what we know about connections between the Batak and the ancient remains of Padang Lawas, looking at nineteenth-century reports of how Batak viewed these antiquities, as well as contemporary Batak interpretations.

The final chapter discusses one of Indonesia’s most spectacular sculptures, the four-meter-high Buddhist bhairava that was discovered in West Sumatra.
Like several of the previously discussed images, this statue has also been linked to a historical personage, in this case the Sumatran king Ādityawarman. The argument that the colossal bhairava image is a portrait of the king is based primarily on a Dutch scholar’s interpretation of one of the many inscriptions left by Ādityawarman. Although Ādityawarman is mostly likely the patron of the statue, it is unlikely that the image was intended to be a portrait. The sculpture itself functions in some of the same ways as the early Malay curse formulas, demarcating boundaries, repelling enemies, and promoting the interests of the king.