

Opium weight

Southeast Asian Collection

Accession Nr.: 4912 

Type: bronze, lead, gold and silver; object for daily use; metalwork

Date of production: 17. század

Place of production: Chiang Mai, Thailand (Siam), Southeast Asia

Materials/Techniques: bronze, cast, engraved

Dimensions: height: 3.4 cm
diameter: 4.2 cm

An octagonal pedestal with a four-legged, two-horned opium weight in the form of a mythical animal (toe or chinte) with a string of pearls carved on its chest, from Chiang Mai (now northern Thailand).

In Burma, in the 14th century, bronze weights, known in literature and by collectors as 'opium weights', were certainly used to determine the value of opium, various precious metals and gems. The largest weight was about 1600 grams, while the smallest was only two hundredths of that. Over the centuries, the monarch who came to the throne usually issued a new series of mythological or animal figures, with slightly varying preferences (frog, dog, bull, elephant...). However, the hintha/hamsa bird (Hungarian: red digging-rod, in India Brahman duck) and the karaweik (Burmese crane) have remained unbroken in popularity. Although they have been replaced in use since British colonialism by simple iron plates (as weights) and the introduction of money as currency, they have not lost their former appeal to collectors and tourists.

In Chiang Mai (capital of the then Lanna Kingdom, then part of Siam), the use of weights is mentioned as early as the 15th century, and the Burmese invasion of the 16th century clearly left its mark on the design of Chiang Mai weights.

Although fewer opium weights survive from Siam than from Burma, they are often older for this reason, the former usually containing more silver than bronze, which gives them a greyish sheen. Another difference is that elephant figurines are more common among Siamese.

