

Holy water vessel: Phra Malai's journey to hell

Southeast Asian Collection

Accession Nr.: 4365 

Type: sculpture; religious or cult object; statuette; small bronze

Date of production: early 19th century

Place of production: Thailand (Siam), Southeast Asia

Materials/Technique s: bronze, painted, gilt, mirror inlay

Dimensions: height: 25cm
width: 13cm
depth: 11.8cm

Acquisition: collection of Ferenc Hopp

The story of Phra Malai, an arhat (Buddhist saint) born in Sri Lanka and possessing the power to travel to the other world, is told in a popular Thai poem composed in the first half of the 18th century that had been adapted from a Pali work written in Ceylon. According to the story, Phra Malai visited hell where sufferers asked for his mediation with their relatives still alive on earth so that their good deeds could reduce their sufferings. The contrast between the different levels of existence that Phra Malai and the sufferers of hell stand for is emphasized by the contrast of the arhat's gilded body and the untreated bronze colour of the underworld.

