

PLATE 13
SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA
Northeast India, Pala period, tenth–eleventh century
Stone, H: 19¼ x W: 11½ x D: 3½ in.
Private Collection, California

During the Pala-Sena period (the eighth to the twelfth century), Buddhism thrived in Bihar and Bengal in northeast India, and a religious fervor produced extensive monasteries. Though these have fallen into ruin, an enormous body of sculpture has survived. According to inscriptions and monks' journals, the Pala kings established Buddhist monasteries as well as supporting Hindu temples. Since the region is the homeland of Shakyamuni, the popularity of his imagery is not surprising.

When the Buddha Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, he called the earth to witness his resolve by placing his hand pointing downward (*bhumisparsha* mudra). Occasionally in Indian art, and more frequently in Southeast Asian art, this scene will include an image below him of the earth goddess, Prithvi, wringing the ocean of his merit from her long locks. Thus the hand gesture identifies the figure, and often, as in this example, the heart-shaped leaves of the *bodhi* tree, under which he gained enlightenment, give a further clue to his identification.

Pala and Sena sculpture consists primarily of steles, such as this one, which were set into niches in a brick building. The many sculptures of the Pala-Sena period no longer have an architectural context, but the approximately eighty extant dated images have allowed art historians the means to establish a chronology for the work.

Here, the Buddha sits on the lotus seat of a lion-throne. The charmingly lopsided throne is minimally decorated, limited to the flying scarves and the single swag of drapery over the seat. Stupas flank the throne.

