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Step inside the reinvented Seattle Asian Art Museum, set to reopen after 3 years

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1 of 3 | The sixth-century, Chinese marble sculpture "Standing Buddha" looks out over the expanded Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

By

[Brendan Kiley](#)

Seattle Times features reporter

"Some/One," the beloved 2001 sculpture by Korean artist [Do Ho Suh](#), is one of those objects that keeps revealing itself the longer you look. At first it sparkles, snagging the eye like a fishhook — but its shiny, scaly surface hides a deeper, sadder weight.

Made from tens of thousands of stainless-steel, military-style dog tags, "[Some/One](#)" is roughly person-shaped (if that person were 8 feet tall), a shining suit of armor with a regal, circular train that pools around it like a lake of mercury. That train is an impressive 24 feet, 4 inches in

diameter — and as far as curator Xiaojin Wu is concerned, Seattle Asian Art Museum’s recent renovation was for “Some/One” as much as anyone.



1 of 2 | “Some/One,” by Korean artist Do Ho Suh, settles in at the newly renovated Seattle Asian Art Museum. The white weights on its train are there to flatten the train, made of military dog tags. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

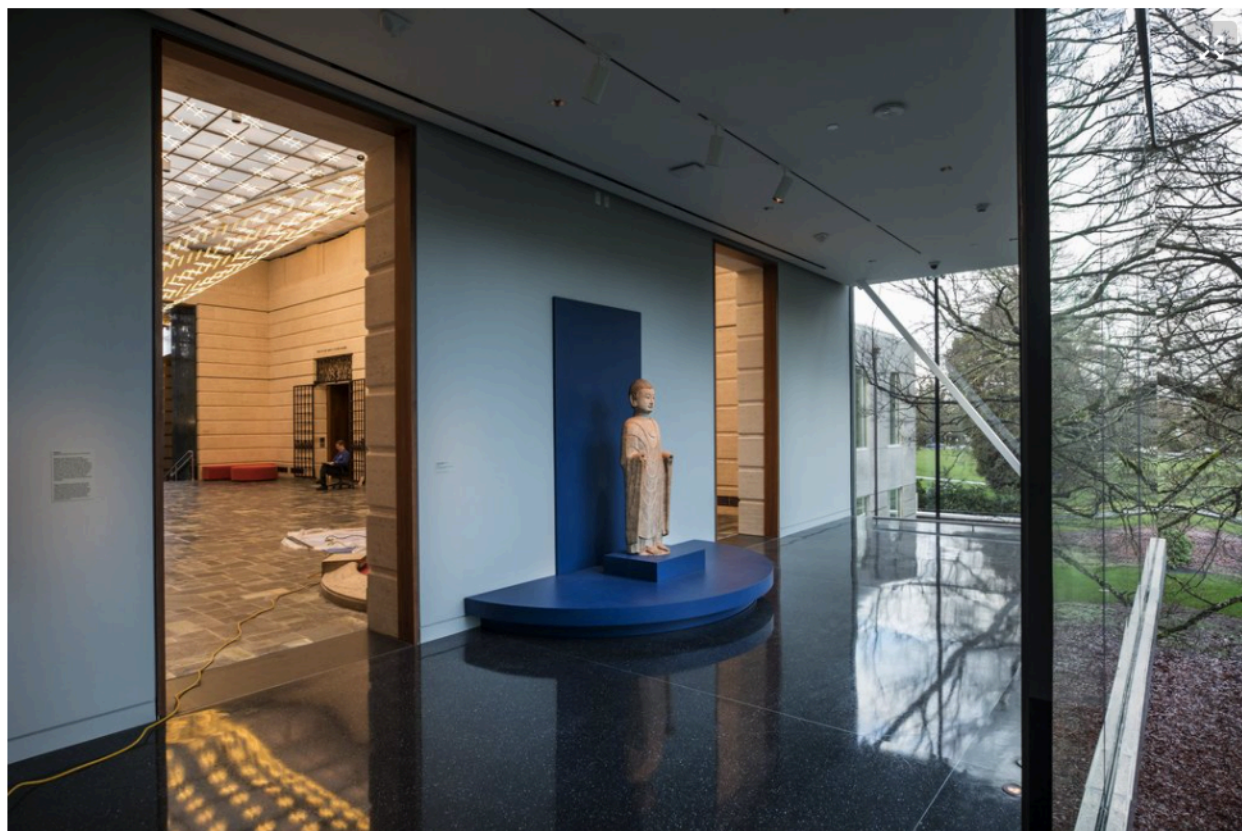
The sculpture used to stand at the downtown Seattle Art Museum but was taken off rotation seven years ago, just as Wu, SAM’s curator of Japanese and Korean art, showed up on staff.

“I find that work so compelling and almost overwhelming,” she said. “It’s absolutely my favorite.” She wanted to move it to Seattle Asian Art Museum in Volunteer Park, but no dice — the passenger elevator and front door were too small.

Luckily for her, SAAM closed its 1933 building for renovation in February 2017, citing a few needs: seismic upgrades; an HVAC system that wouldn’t ruin delicate fabric and paper; and, crucially, a new

gallery and freight elevator large enough to accommodate a certain sculpture.

Wu only had to wait seven years, but now “Some/One” stands in splendor at SAAM, which reopens Saturday, Feb. 8. (Opening weekend is sold out.)



The Chinese marble sculpture “Standing Buddha,” dating to the sixth century, is positioned at the divide between Seattle Asian Art Museum’s old 1933 building and its new, glassy addition. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

The \$56.5 million renovation, designed and executed by local firm LMN, was mostly paid for by private donors (\$27.1 million), with \$21 million from the city and \$2.9 million from Washington state and King County, plus \$5.5 million in federal historic tax credits.

The renovation also opened the door for reinvention, spurring some bold curatorial moves from a three-person team (Wu; Ping Foong, SAM curator of Chinese art; and Darielle Mason, curator of Indian and Himalayan art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art).

One big display of ceramics, for example, has no labels, inviting us to sharpen our eyes and look deeply. (Those who crave scholarship can

find it on a nearby screen.) Bright, contemporary objects punctuate rooms full of dun-colored antiquities. And, most significantly, the museum is now organized not by country or epoch, but cross-culturally and under broad themes (“Spiritual Journeys,” “What Is Precious?,” etc.) No “culture in a box” for SAAM redux.

This tactic is not unprecedented, but it is unusual. No other significant, stand-alone Asian art museum in the U.S. has taken this approach.

The new SAAM, like the old one, only exhibits around 4.5% of its total collection at any one time, but organizing by theme gives current and future curators more flexibility, allowing them to a) emphasize juxtapositions and cross-cultural transmission; b) rotate objects more often; and c) find excuses to show rarely seen items. SAAM has a Filipino collection, for example, but it’s not robust enough to merit its own exhibition. The new SAAM, however, presents Filipino bulul (rice deities) alongside a Chinese Shoulao (god of longevity) under the broad thematic umbrella of “Bringing Blessings.”



Curators Ping Foong and Xiaojin Wu stand in the new, glassed-in terrace at the renovated Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

I confess some nostalgic affection for yester-SAAM — its old hodgepodge vibe, and the central court once stuffed with ancient, indifferent statuary, were a reliable place of solitary refuge during turbulent moments in my young adulthood. But museums don't thrive on the solitude of overwrought 20-somethings and, selfish concerns aside, the new museum is, objectively, more lively. My first walk through, I found new objects to get lost in, and familiar objects given new life. Here are five that caught my eye. Visit. You'll find your own.

"Nandi," 2008, India



The orange, extruded-fiberglass "Nandi" brightly punctuates Seattle Asian Art Museum's "Spiritual Journeys" gallery, which is full of stone, wood and other visually muted materials. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

What's this bright, orangey-red, extruded-plastic bull doing here among the stone Buddhas and bronze Vishnus? The curators were hoping you'd ask. This is one of those contemporary, seemingly non sequitur objects placed to provoke questions about how one thing is like or unlike its neighbors. In this case, the titular Nandi is a bull, a symbol/vehicle for Shiva, one of the

main Hindu deities — so kin to the other gods and guardians in the room. Unlike them, this neo-pop Nandi was made by Arunkumar H G, an Indian toy-maker-turned-artist who sculpts with plastic, cow dung, wood salvaged from industrial sites and other detritus. “If we give a small visit to our trash cans,” he said in [a 2018 interview](#), “we can realize what our time is up to.”

Dragon Tamer Luohan, 14th century, China

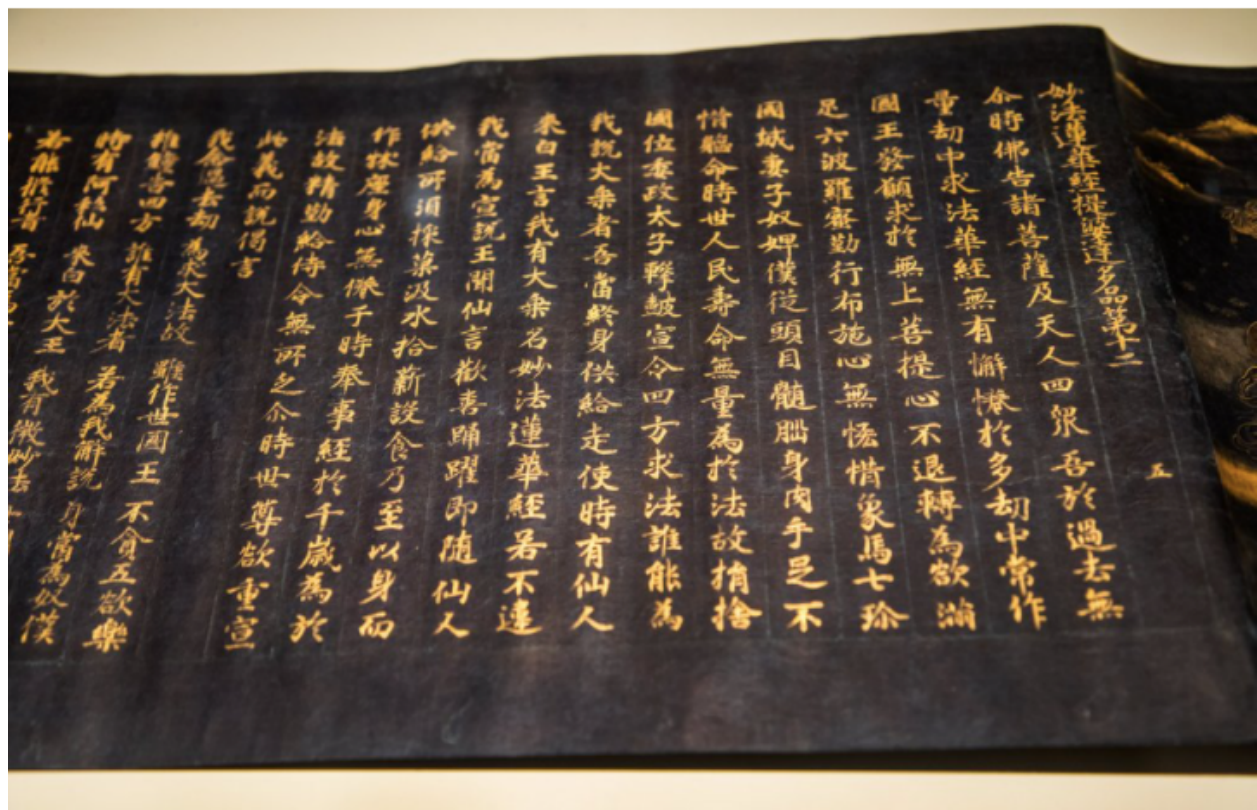


The Dragon Tamer Luohan, which had long been misidentified as a monk at the moment of enlightenment, stands in the “Bringing Blessings” gallery at Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

This enigmatic, high-voltage individual had a secret hidden in his back. Unlike, say, a Guanyin bodhisattva statue (of which there are many,

meaning lots of scholarship and comparisons), he seems to be one of a kind. Nobody knew who he was. For years, SAM called him “Monk at the Moment of Enlightenment” because bald usually equals monk and SAM’s founder, Dr. Richard Fuller, thought he had an enlightenment-ish expression. That did not satisfy Foong’s scholastic sensibilities: “When the museum closed down, I spent a *lot* of one-on-one time with him.” She discovered a previously unnoticed inscription on a plug in his back (some holy sculptures are holey sculptures, with cavities for sutras or consecrated objects) with a faint Chinese character found in the word for “dragon tamer.” Foong fell into a research hole, studying his twisting torso and peculiar grip, concluding he was a luohan (one of the Buddha’s immediate disciples, who developed unusual powers) with a specialty in dragons, and helped prevent floods and droughts. Regardless, he looks like a monk who can ride the lightning.

Lotus Sutra, 12th century, Japan (Heian period); Leaf from the “Blue Qur’an,” ninth century, Tunisia



1 of 2 | A late-12th-century copy of the Lotus Sutra, hand copied in gold and silver on indigo-dyed paper, sits in the “Sacred Texts and Tales” gallery at Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

These two gorgeous, handwritten texts are separated by centuries and continents, but share a powerful visual resonance: golden script twinkling against midnight-blue, indigo-dyed paper. And Foong thinks they may have been produced under similar circumstances: devotees copying sacred words by candlelight, chanting as they went. “From a humanist point of view, they have similar ground,” she said. “Still, it’s kind of a daring juxtaposition — someone restricted to religious thinking or practice would not put Buddhist art and Islamic art in the same case.”

“Lotus and Ducks” and “Pine and Rock,” 1690s (Qing dynasty), China

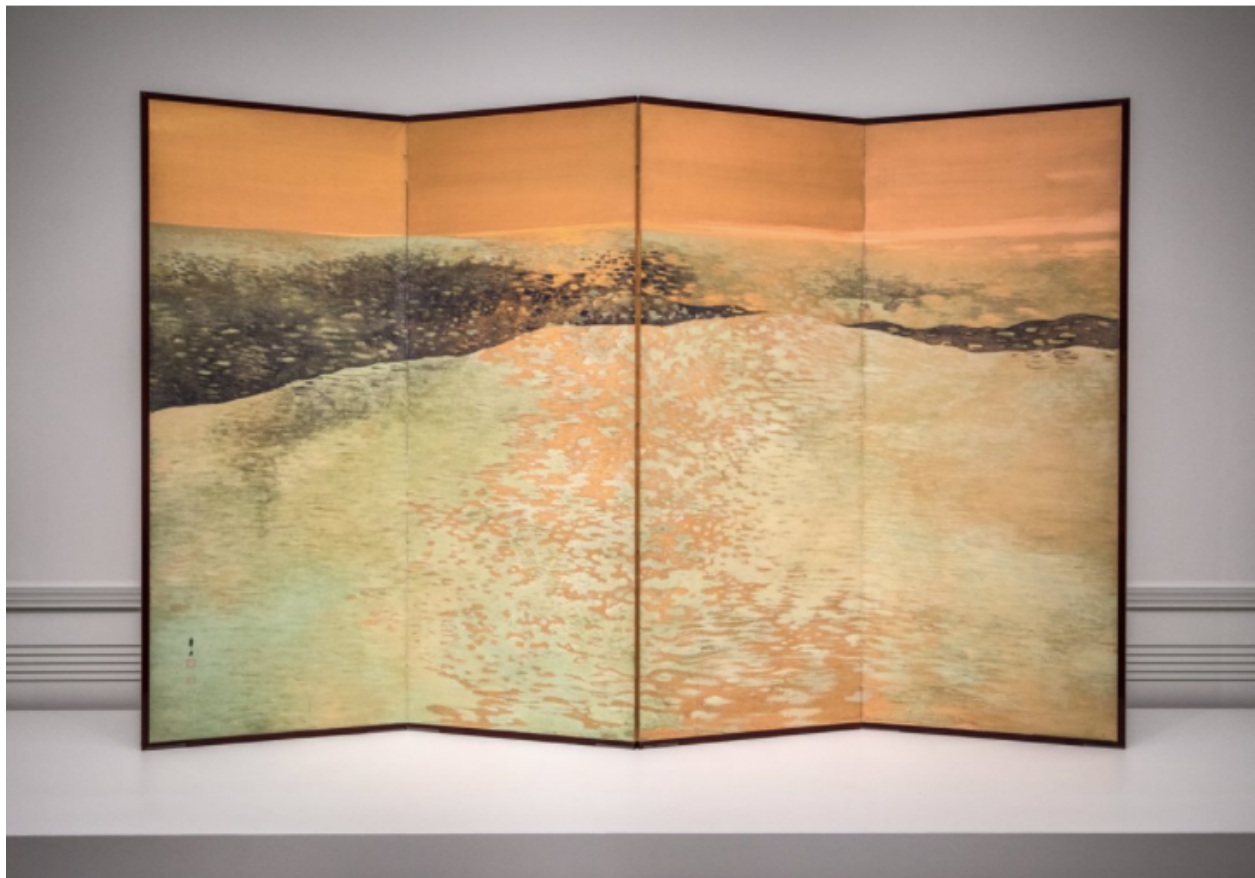


1 of 2 | “Lotus and Ducks,” a scroll painting from the 1690s by eccentric Chinese artist Bada Shanren, is currently hanging in the “Picturing Nature” gallery at SAAM. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

Bada Shanren was a strange man who made strange paintings, infusing innocuous subjects with uncanny psychological tension — like this duck warily eyeing a lotus leaf, or the out-of-place rock that seems to be cowering beneath (or fighting with?) a threatening tree. Bada was a

prince of the freshly fallen Ming dynasty, which was a dangerous thing to be. While other Ming notables were being murdered or committing suicide, Bada entered a monastery and started behaving oddly: going mute for long periods; laughing, screaming or weeping randomly; spinning in circles in the marketplace. People at the time weren't sure whether he was "mentally disordered" (as one letter put it) or faking it to protect himself. "We still don't know," Foong said, "but his imagery is very, very unique." The weird drama of his subjects (plus his wild, unfussy style) made his paintings famous — and expensive. The credits at the bottom of the labels, listing the donors it took to buy the works, is nearly as long as the explanatory text.

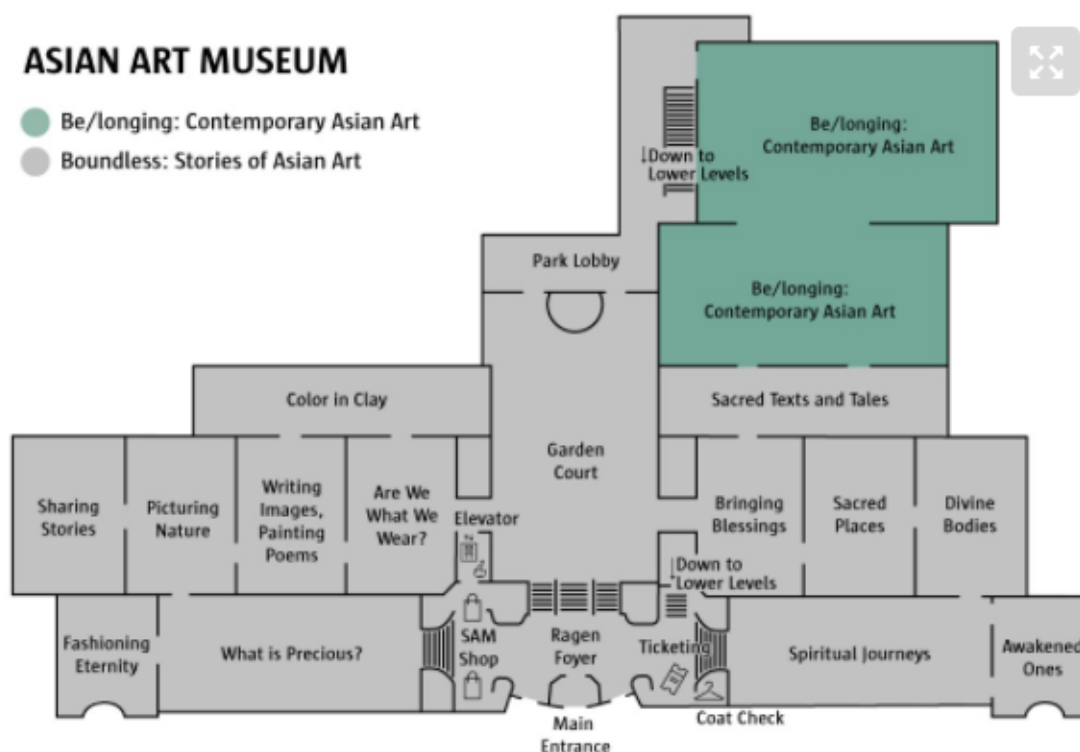
"Green Waves," circa 1910, Japan



The transportive silk painting "Green Waves" by Japanese artist Tsuji Kakō is now on display in the "Picturing Nature" gallery at SAAM, which has foregone classifying art by country or epoch. (Steve Ringman / The Seattle Times)

This painting is a ticket to another dimension. Painted with ink and gold on silk (with a golden sky and golden light speckling its blue-and-

foamy-green waves), artist Tsuji Kakō has made a seascape that almost moves, and is as mysterious and enveloping as the mind. It's one of Wu's favorites (after "Some/One," of course), and she says its high horizon line is part of the magic, subsuming us in its swells. Wu recommends looking at "Green Waves" from halfway across the room, then slowly approaching. Majestic seems too gaudy a word for the sublimity of "Green Waves" — just call it awesome.



The floorplan of the renovated Seattle Asian Art Museum. (Courtesy of Seattle Art Museum)

Seattle Asian Art Museum reopens Saturday, Feb. 8; 1400 E. Prospect St., Seattle; opening weekend Feb. 8-9 sold out; Feb. 12 onward: on-site tickets \$0-\$14.99 (by donation); online tickets up to \$14.99; 206-654-3210, seattleartmuseum.org/visit/asian-art-museum

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