

The Great Wave: The Influence of the Mongol Empire on Javanese Art

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In 1289 the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire and Emperor of China, Kublai Khan, sent his ambassadors to the Indonesian archipelago in an attempt to collect tribute from the Javanese kingdom of Singhasari. As an act of refusal its renowned king Kertanegara ordered the disfigurement of the Khan's envoy in a manner befitting a common criminal – the slashing off of his nose – and brandished his forehead with a defiant response. This dramatic form of repudiation only escalated the antagonistic relationship between these two rulers, leading to the Khan undertaking a large punitive invasion of the Javanese kingdom. Its disastrous outcome is believed to be one of the factors that ultimately weakened the Khanate's hold on Yuan China. Yet, despite the hostile diplomatic clashing of these two entities, the late 13th century evidenced a welcoming artistic influence of the visual cultures of the Khanate – mainly Yuan China – on the arts of Java. Javanese metalwork, architectural ornamentation, and courtly objects of this era are imbued with recognizable foreign elements, and Chinese ceramics continued to be a desirable import. This analysis will identify several of these artistic forms and motifs – both in their manifestations in the arts of the Khanate and their Javanese variations – and will explore their significance in the subsequent evolution of Javanese art and culture.