Borobudur, the largest Buddhist monument in the world, is situated in Central Java, north of the modern-day city of Yogyakarta. It was constructed on the Kedu Plain at the confluence of two rivers, the Progo and the Elo, and has a unique setting flanked by four volcanoes. Built on an artificial hill, this pyramidal structure comprises a square base that supports four square terraces. Surmounting these are three circular terraces. These levels are connected by a series of staircases and archways that bifurcate each of the four sides of the monument. At Borobudur’s summit, 31.5 meters above its ground line, is a central stupa (a domelike or rounded structure that usually holds a relic of the Buddha, a great teacher, or an honored devotee, and which may be architectural or constructed in miniature). Borobudur measures approximately 123 meters from north to south and 117 meters east to west, and it has been estimated that more than 1 million blocks were used for its construction, representing 55,000 square meters of andesite stone. Although it is traditionally dated to 824 CE on the basis of an indirect epigraphic source, it is more probable that the monument was constructed sometime during the early Central Javanese period, roughly between 780 and 830 CE.

Borobudur is associated with the patronage of the Buddhist Sailendra royal family, a short-lived ruling lineage that encouraged an efflorescence of Buddhist monuments and sculpture during their approximately 50-year overlordship in the area of Central Java. Borobudur then abruptly disappears from Javanese history. In the early years of the 20th century, Dutch colonial scholars and archaeologists led a modest restoration of the then-deteriorating monument. This was succeeded by a more extensive ten-year restoration project—which was completed in 1983—under the auspices of the Indonesian government and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Borobudur may be regarded as a monumental sculpture. It also represents a masterwork of sculptural relief and three-dimensional sculptural imagery. There are 1,460 panels of narrative reliefs that line the base and four square terraces of the monument. Practically all have been identified and their sources may be found in various sutras (teachings of the Buddha) and Buddhist texts; however, no extant recensions of this literature correspond to Borobudur’s interpretation of these stories. The base of the monument is sculpted with 160 reliefs illustrating the *Mahakarmavibhanga*, or “The Great Classification of Cause and Effect,” which describes the rewards for those who perform specific meritorious deeds, as well as the Buddhist hells prescribed for those guilty of a Buddhist sin. This area is also known as the Hidden Foot, as a series of large undecorated stone blocks completely covers these narratives. It was previously theorized that this was intended for theological reasons, to shield devout Buddhist pilgrims from their contents. Current belief is that this outer structure represents a change in building plans, as Borobudur may have demonstrated engineering flaws during its construction and the inclusion of the blocks was an attempt to buttress the monument.

The narrative program of the balustrade and the lower section of the main wall of the first gallery includes a series of selected episodes from the *Jātakas* (stories of the Buddha in his earlier incarnations) and *Avadānas* (stories of virtuous or heroic behavior). This was complemented on the upper register of the first gallery wall by 120 reliefs from the *Lalitavistara*, a version of Buddha’s biography. These episodes detail the Buddha’s life through his first sermon in the Deer Park at Benares, India. The balustrade of the second gallery continues the visual narration of the *Jātakas* and *Avadānas*, whereas the corresponding wall commences an extended series of 460 reliefs illustrating the *Gandhavyūha*. This text relates the story of the Indian prince...
Sudhana, a Buddhist pilgrim who seeks enlightenment. He received spiritual instructions from 53 different kalyanāmitras (spiritual teachers); subsequently, he was taught directly by the bodhisattvas Maitreya and Samantabhadra. This story continues on the balustrade and wall of the third gallery, as well as the balustrade of the fourth gallery. The fourth gallery wall concludes the program with an addendum to the Gandavyūha, the Bhdracarā (a vow to follow the example of Samantabhadra). The space allotted this sutra suggests the heightened significance that it held for the Javanese of this era.

In addition to the narrative program, the terraces of Borobudur are embellished with more than 1,200 ornamental panels. The monument’s large decorative vocabulary includes a myriad of foliate patterns, drain-age spouts in the form of three-dimensional makaras (mythological crocodile-like creatures associated with water and the primordial source of life), and ornate carvings of kālamakara (a composite motif of animal and vegetal imagery containing a monster head flanked by two makaras) on the edifice’s gateways. Conversely, the three-dimensional sculptural repertory at Borobudur is limited to images of seated Buddhas. Seventy-two of these sculptures are found on the upper three circular terraces; each is placed within a trellised stupa. Another 432 examples are situated in open niches on the main walls of the four square terraces below.

The exact meaning of Borobudur is still widely debated, and it is indeed possible that the monument is simultaneously emblematic of a multitude of beliefs or religious systems. Borobudur has often been called a “cosmic mountain.” This element held significance in ancient Javanese beliefs as well as among the Indian religions that influenced Java. It has also been referred to as a stupa; however, as no relic has been discovered in its interior, it cannot be ascertained whether Borobudur had any mortuary associations. Borobudur is also traditionally perceived as a tripartite three-dimensional diagram of the Buddhist world. The subject matter of the Hidden Foot relates this area with Kāmadhātu (Realm of Desire), whereas that of the four square terraces above, relating themes of Buddhist virtue and stories of those searching for a release from materialistic pleasures and worldly existence, may epitomize the Rūpadhātu (World of Form). The three circular terraces, which are devoid of any decorative or narrative program and comprise only the imagery of stupas and Buddhas, are considered Arūpadhātu (World of Formlessness). The most widely debated hypothesis is that Borobudur was intended as a mandala (a diagram of the cosmos in either a two-dimensional or three-di-mensional format that was employed in Indian religions as a guide for meditation or visualization). The Buddhas at Borobudur, which have been identified on the basis of their mudras (hand gestures), are arranged hierarchically to suggest that they represent the Five Tathāgatas: the transcendental Buddha Vairocana, who has the power to transform himself into innumerable Buddhas, and the four cosmic Buddhas of the cardinal directions. Furthermore, Borobudur’s four gateways are a common feature of a mandala. However, too many iconographic inconsistencies exist to substantiate this theory further, and the religious imagery of Borobudur defies any mandala system that may have been known by the Javanese of this era. It is more probable that the resolution to Borobudur’s enigma may be found in its narrative program that parallels the spiritual goals of Buddhist devotees.

Further Reading
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Gomez, Luis O., and Hiram W. Woodward Jr., editors, Barabudur: History and Significance of a Buddhist Monument, Berkeley: University of California, 1981
Snodgrass, Adrian, The Symbolism of the Stupa, Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1985

FRANCIS VAN BOSSUIT ca. 1635–1692
Dutch, active in Italy
Born in Brussels and trained in Antwerp, Francis van Bossuit settled in Rome about 1655. He worked predominantly as a carver in ivory and wood, as well as a modeler in clay and wax. About his artistic origins nothing is known. He remained in Italy for about 25