



SECRETS OF
BUDDHIST ART
Tibet, Japan, and Korea

Ingram Gallery | February 10–May 7, 2017

Tibet, Japan, and Korea all practice forms of esoteric Buddhism, in which secret traditions are explained only to initiates. A key to understanding these secrets is to study the complex array of both human and divine figures within esoteric Buddhism, as well as the rich, multilayered vocabularies of motifs that instruct and assist practitioners. This exhibition showcases magnificent and rare works from the world-renowned Newark Museum collection, introducing a general audience to the dazzling aesthetics of Buddhist art and providing a basic understanding of how these objects function within Buddhist practice. The exhibition also encourages comparisons among regional aesthetics while distinguishing aspects unique to each area. A Tibetan sand mandala is being ritually created in the education gallery, connecting the living practice to early works of art.

BUDDHA, BUDDHAS, AND BODHISATTVAS

Within esoteric Buddhist practices, the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who lived in India in the sixth century BCE, and numerous nonhistorical Buddhas, other enlightened beings, are worshipped. Visual representations of both the historical Buddha and nonhistorical Buddhas portray them with relatively simple clothing and no jewelry, demonstrating the renunciation of worldly cares by an enlightened being (see cover). Thirty-four major and eighty minor features are hallmarks of Buddhahood: these include dark, curly hair; an *ushnisha*, which is a hairstyle or protuberance that covers a brain too big for a regular skull; an *urna*, which is a forehead mark that emits light; and elongated earlobes, alluding to the historical Buddha's former status as a prince who once wore heavy earrings. Rounded shoulders, a broad chest, and long, supple fingers and toes are also indicators of Buddhahood. Differentiations between the historical and nonhistorical Buddhas are found in skin-tones, attributes, and sometimes *mudras* (hand gestures).

Buddhist practices of Tibet, Japan, and Korea are also populated with numerous bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are spiritually realized figures who postpone *nirvana* (the ceasing of cyclic existence) to assist other sentient beings on their journey toward enlightenment. In art, bodhisattvas frequently are distinguished from Buddhas by jewelry—diadems, earrings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, anklets—and by luxurious, often gravity-defying clothing that floats around them (fig. 1). Devotees worship some bodhisattvas as their central practice, much like the veneration of specific saints in Roman Catholic traditions.

Figure 1





Figure 2

LIFE AND DEATH

The Buddhist worldview is that we are living in *samsara*. *Samsara* is a realm of attachment—both mental and physical—filled with joys and sorrows. Such attachments inherently cause suffering. For Buddhists the only way to annihilate this suffering is to attain *nirvana*. *Nirvana* is a state of nonbeing—a simultaneous condition of “somethingness” and “nothingness” that transcends the world of *samsara*.

Buddhist understanding of living and dying derives from an Indian cultural tradition where souls are reborn based on their *karma*. *Karma* is the sum of one’s intentions and actions, not only for this current lifetime, but also from one’s previous lifetimes. One’s continuous cumulative conduct determines what occurs when one dies. Most beings—humans and animals—will experience numerous (even countless) lifetimes to reach the desired goal of *nirvana*.

Perhaps because this vision of constant rebirth, with temporary placements in heavens and hells (fig. 2), was demoralizing, alternatives were presented. Beginning as early as the seventh century and continuing today, many Buddhist

practitioners in Tibet, Japan, and Korea worship Amitabha (Buddha of Limitless Light), who presides over Sukhavati (Western Paradise). Individuals pray to be reborn in Western Paradise not only because that guarantees escape from additional cycles of rebirth, but also because it is a delightful waiting area for the eventual attainment of *nirvana*.

Devotees strive to accumulate religious merit because it increases one’s chances of a better rebirth. Merit for the deceased as well as the living can be acquired in many ways, including commissioning, creating, and viewing Buddhist art. All the works in this exhibition thus perform merit-making functions, in the past (when they were commissioned and created), the present (their existence), and the future (through their viewing potential).

HEALTH AND WEALTH

Specific Buddhas and bodhisattvas are worshipped to promote good health, longevity, and wealth. While the peaceful deities are easily understandable as embodiments of health and wealth, the gruesome deities often confuse the uninitiated. Some wrathful deities personify particular evils or illnesses. Others



are versions of peaceful divinities whose ferocity is deemed more effective at protecting worshippers from illness, poverty, famine, floods, droughts, landslides, earthquakes, and other calamities, like fighting fire with fire.

Specific visual vocabularies are employed to evoke appropriate characteristics for Buddhist deities. Rainbows, golden light-beams, verdant landscapes, glorious palaces, wish-granting trees, and showers of flowers indicate sacred idylls and abodes of abundance. Macabre masses of flames or billows of smoke signify powerful wisdom and energy as inexhaustible as the blazing sun, while seas of blood or charnel grounds, the residence of terrifying inhabitants, teach nonattachment (fig. 3).

Divinities worshipped to promote good health and increased wealth vary from guardians of spiritual and material riches to protectors of certain directions, regions, or places. They are embodiments of the stars and vanquishers of evil spirits. Most important, it is believed that in addition to their other functions, all these deities assist devotees in their ultimate quest for enlightenment.

TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The direct transmission of teachings from teacher to student is of paramount importance in all forms of Buddhism. Because teachers play such vital roles, portraits of real and legendary instructors take center stage in Buddhist art (fig. 4). Distinct hairstyles, costumes, physical features, mudras, and *asanas* (postures) help identify disciples, ascetics, exorcists, scholars, poets, and monks, as do the settings inhabited by this vast array of people.

This exhibition includes portraits of teachers and students not only from different regions and periods of time, but also from different Buddhist schools within each region. The artistic styles of these portraits relate to varying aspects of religious practice. Particularly rare for any museum collection are the two complete sets of biographical paintings. The detailed hagiographies (biographies of saints) featured at the Frist Center include fifteen Tibetan paintings that illustrate the life of Tsongkhapa and four Japanese paintings that illuminate the life of Tokuhon.



Figure 4

Figure 3

MANDALA—SPHERES OF INFLUENCE

Mandalas are perhaps the most recognized form of Tibetan Buddhist art (fig. 5). The Sanskrit word *mandala* corresponds to more than a type of painting or sculpture. Literally translated as “circle” or “cycle,” its meaning encompasses “sphere of influence,” “circle of friends,” and “entourage of retainers.” *Mandala* is also the name for a geometric configuration of a celestial palace that houses specific central deities with their affiliated and divine retinues. In two dimensions, the palace appears like an architectural diagram where the four sides are folded outward from the center. Many sculptures and paintings of mandala are situated within a divine lotus (representing purity and illustrated as multicolored petals) and surrounded by *vajra* (ritual scepters), rings of purifying fire, and/or celestial clouds.

The Tibetan tradition of making temporary mandalas out of sand is the external physical realization of an internal mental practice—sequentially visualizing and meditating on every detail necessary to attract and house divine forms, as well as studying every aspect of each divinity. Requests may be made of the divinities once they are called into the mandala. One must then release them back to the cosmos, to demonstrate nonattachment and to prevent divine displeasure. The act of return involves slicing the sand and sweeping it into a ritual vessel, and then pouring the sand into a body of water.

Prior to modern access to synthetic dyes, the sand used for mandalas was created by hand-crushing semiprecious stones (such as lapis lazuli, azurite, malachite, coral, quartz, or orpiment), resulting in a physical jewel-palace. In the Buddhist worldview, Nagaraja (Snake Kings) rule over water and the underworld and are guardians of riches—including gemstones like the ones originally pulverized to make sand. Thus, pouring the sand into the waters returns them to the source.

Katherine Anne Paul, PhD
Guest curator, *Secrets of Buddhist Art*
Curator, Arts of Asia, Newark Museum



Figure 5

Glossary

Adi-Buddha (Sanskrit): a first or primordial Buddha; a spiritual fount of specific teachings.

arakan (Japanese): a disciple of the historical Buddha.

arhat (Sanskrit): a disciple of the historical Buddha.

asana (Sanskrit): a body posture.

bija (Sanskrit): a seed syllable (like *Om*) that both calls and embodies Buddhist deities.

bodhisattva (Sanskrit): an enlightened or awakened being who has chosen to stay in this world to help others attain nirvana.

Buddha (Sanskrit): a being who embodies enlightenment.

cintamani (Sanskrit): a flaming or wish-granting jewel.

dharma (Sanskrit): Buddhist teachings; sometimes called “Buddhist law.”

dhonka (Tibetan): a distinctive vest worn by Tibetan Buddhist monks.

Dhyana-Buddha (Sanskrit): a name for the Meditational Buddha, the focus of particular meditation practices.

dorje (Tibetan): see *vajra*.

drilbu (Tibetan): see *ghanta*.

geumgang (Korean): see *vajra*.

ghanta (Sanskrit): a ritual bell that is decorated with half a vajra at its finial; often paired with a vajra ritual scepter (see *vajra*).

hagiography: a biography of a saint.

Jataka (Sanskrit): a tale of a previous life of the historical Buddha.

karma (Sanskrit): the sum of one’s intentions and actions during not only this current lifetime, but also all previous lifetimes.

kongo (Japanese): see *vajra*.

lama (Tibetan): a particularly distinguished religious practitioner who blesses and counsels personal followers. Not all monks are considered lamas.

mamori (Japanese): an amulet.

mandala (Sanskrit): a geometric configuration of a celestial palace (to house central deities and divine retinue) that is viewed like an architectural diagram where the four sides are folded outward from the center.

mandara (Japanese): see *mandala*.

mantra (Sanskrit): a combination of seed syllables (see *bija*) that invokes specific deities.

mudra (Sanskrit): a ritual hand gesture that contains spiritual power.

nanhan (Korean): a disciple of the historical Buddha.

nirvana (Sanskrit): the state beyond the cycle of rebirth.

rakan (Japanese): a disciple of the historical Buddha.

samsara (Sanskrit): the world we live in; the world of suffering.

sangha (Sanskrit): the community of Buddhists.

Sanskrit: the sacred language of Buddhism, like Latin for the Roman Catholic Church.

tantra (Sanskrit): a teaching that aims to manipulate external forces with internal practices to attain spiritual powers.

Tathagatha Buddha (Sanskrit): a forefather Buddha; a head of the five Buddha families.

triratna (Sanskrit): literally “triple gem”; the triad of Buddha, *dharma* (Buddhist teachings), and *sangha* (Buddhist community).

urna (Sanskrit): a forehead mark.

ushnisha (Sanskrit): the hairstyle or protuberance on top of a Buddha’s head. It represents the size of the Buddha’s brain, which is too large for a regular skull.

vajra (Sanskrit): sometimes translated as “thunderbolt” or “diamond.” In art, a ritual scepter that symbolically represents a vast number of things, including but not limited to male energy, compassion, and the simultaneous creation/collapsing of duality.

zushi (Japanese): a small portable shrine.

Illustrations

Cover: Attributed to Gyeju (flourished ca. 1680s). **Seated Buddha**, Korea, 17th century, Joseon Period (1392–1912). Wood, lacquer, gold, and rock crystal. Newark Museum, Purchase 2013 Mr. and Mrs. William V. Griffin Fund, 2013.26

Figure 1: **Soul-Blessing Avalokiteshvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion)**, Japan, early Meiji period (1868–1912). Colors, gold, and silk. Newark Museum, Purchase 1921, TR3.1921.2

Figure 2: **Scenes of Hell** (detail), Japan, Edo period (1603–1868). Ink, colors, and paper. Newark Museum, Purchase 1915, 15.1106

Figure 3: **Palden Lhamo (Protectress of Lhasa)**, Tibet, 18th century. Colors on cloth. Newark Museum, Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Eric Berger, 1984, 84.383

Figure 4: **The Great Monk Master Haesong Seated in Front of a Folding Screen**, Northern Gyeongsong, Korea, early 20th century. Ink, colors, and paper. Newark Museum, Purchase 2012 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund, 2012.20

Figure 5: **Avalokiteshvara Mandala**, Tibet, 18th–19th centuries. Colors on gold cloth. Newark Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack Zimmerman, 1991, 91.134

This exhibition was organized by the Newark Museum.

Platinum Sponsor



Supporting Sponsors



THE
NISSAN
FOUNDATION

KOREA **KF**
FOUNDATION

Hospitality Sponsor



Conservation of the works of art for this exhibition was supported by
E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

Supported in part by
the 2017 Frist Gala Nirvana and Mandala Society Patrons and

METRO ARTS



THE FRIST
CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Downtown Nashville
919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
fristcenter.org

#BuddhismFCVA