

PRESS RELEASE

THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART TO OPEN
“DEATH IS NOT THE END,”
AN EXHIBITION ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE
IN TIBETAN BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN ART,
OPENING MARCH 17



Press Preview: Thursday, March 16, 9:00–11:00 AM

Public Opening: Friday, March 17, 6:00–10:00 PM

Free opening weekend: March 18 -19, 11:00 AM – 5:00 PM

NEW YORK, NY, JANUARY 19, 2023 —The Rubin Museum of Art is pleased to present “**Death Is Not the End,**” a new exhibition opening March 17 that explores notions of death and the afterlife through the art of Tibetan Buddhism and Christianity. Featuring prints, oil paintings, bone ornaments, thangka paintings, sculptures, illuminated manuscripts, and ritual objects, “Death Is Not the End” invites contemplation on the universal human condition of impermanence and the desire to continue to exist. This cross-cultural exhibition brings together 58 objects spanning 12 centuries from the Rubin Museum’s collection alongside artworks on loan from private collections and major institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Morgan Library & Museum; Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp; Wellcome Collection, London; Nelson Atkins Museum, Kansas City; San Antonio Museum of Art, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and more. The exhibition is part of the Rubin Museum’s yearlong thematic focus on Life After, exploring moments of change that propel us into the unknown. “Death Is Not the End” will be on view March 17, 2023, to January 14, 2024.

Buddhist and Christian cultures share the certainty of our mortality in this world while also proposing an existence after this lifetime. Depending on the circumstances, there is a promise of a better place, or one of further purifying suffering to ensure the eventual attainment of a better existence. These views, in their most general sense, refute the permanence of death while accepting its inevitability. “Death Is Not the End” considers the ideas that balance this apparent contradiction.

The exhibition will be organized around three major themes: *The Human Condition*, or the shared understanding of our mortality in this world; *States In-Between*, or the concepts of limbo, purgatory, and bardo; and *(After)life*, focusing on resurrection, ideas of transformation, and heaven.

“During a time of great global uncertainty, loss, and turmoil, many question and ponder the various ideas related to the afterlife,” says **Senior Curator of Himalayan Art Elena Pakhoutova**. “In pairing artworks from Christianity—the most familiar cultural framework in the United States—with those from Buddhism, a less known visual culture in the West, we highlight a universal common ground and encourage visitors’ inquiry as they engage with these diverse objects. I hope that this exhibition inspires conversations around the sometimes challenging or uncomfortable topic of what comes after life, as well as respect for different perspectives and approaches.”

Notable artworks on view from the Rubin Museum’s collection will include *The Wheel of Life* painting (Tibet; 19th century), which illustrates the larger context of human existence, the fundamental causes of suffering, and the inevitability of death and rebirth; the *Yama Dharmaraja* painting (Tibet; 18th century) of a wrathful deity associated with Vajrabhairava, conqueror of death; the painted terracotta sculpture of dancing skeletons known as *Lords of the Charnel Ground*, *Smashana Adipati* (Tibet; 18th century), who protect tantric yogis striving to be free from attachment; *Bone Ornaments* (Tibet, 18th–19th century), an apron practitioners would wear to overcome attachment to self and their body; *Avalokiteshvara and His Pure Realm* (Tibet, late 18th–early 19th century), a painting of the realm where beings aspire to be reborn, to be in the presence of the deity free from suffering; and more.



Left: *Wheel of Life*; Tibet or Mongolia; 19th century; pigments on cloth; Rubin Museum of Art; gift of Shelley and Donald Rubin; C2006.66.131 (HAR 78)

Center: Pieter van der Heyden (Netherlandish, ca. 1525–1569); *The Descent of Christ Into Limbo*; Antwerp; ca. 1561; engraving; first state of two; sheet: 9 1/16 x 11 7/16 in. (23 x 29 cm); lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1926 (26.72.41)

Works on loan will include the painting *A Woman Divided into Two Representing Life and Death* (ca. 18th century; Wellcome Collection), an allegorical depiction of the human condition, which is less overtly religious and intended to provoke intellectual and moralistic reflection on mortality; *The Last Judgment* by a follower of Hieronymus Bosch (late 16th century; Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which the horrors of hell so vividly portrayed are thought to provide an encouragement to renounce immoral living in anticipation of the Last Judgement and salvation; Pieter van der Heyden's engraving of *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Netherlands; ca. 1561), which shows Christ appearing in a sphere of radiance, guiding souls that are crowding out of the hellish mouth of limbo and led to heaven; a Buddhist album leaf painting illustrating *Beings Liberated from Hell by the Blessings of the Buddha* (Inner Mongolia; 18th–19th century; Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp), which depicts another instance of “divine intervention” by Buddha Vairochana; and more.

“Death Is Not the End” is curated by Elena Pakhoutova, Senior Curator of Himalayan Art at the Rubin Museum.

About Elena Pakhoutova

Elena Pakhoutova, Senior Curator of Himalayan Art at the Rubin Museum of Art, holds a PhD in Asian art history and criticism from the University of Virginia. Her background in Tibetan Buddhist studies informs her interdisciplinary approach to art history and curation. Her research explores dialogues in the visual traditions of Inner Asia, art and ritual, art production and patronage, text and image, and narrative in Tibetan visual culture. Her recent interests include material culture and contemporary Tibetan art.

At the Rubin Museum, her thematic exhibitions introduce and contextualize Tibetan, Himalayan, and Nepalese art and include *Gateway to Himalayan Art*, *Once Upon Many Times: Legends and Myths in Himalayan Art*, *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies*, *The Second Buddha: Master of Time*, and co-curated *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual* and *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*. Her cross-cultural exhibitions *Count Your Blessings: The Art of Prayer Beads in Asia* and co-curated *Illuminated: The Art of Sacred Books* presented Himalayan art in the broader context of material and ritual culture. *The Power of Intention: Reinventing the (Prayer) Wheel* brought together traditional and contemporary works of art and deconstructed core Buddhist concepts with contemporary new media, immersive and impermanent art. Most recently, she curated the Rubin Museum's iteration of *Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment*, which was originally conceived by John Henry Rice of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and Jeffrey S. Durham of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. She is co-leading with Karl Debreczeny the Rubin Museum's Project Himalayan Art.

Support

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About the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art in Chelsea, New York City, explores and celebrates the diversity and uniqueness of Himalayan art, ideas, and cultures across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, largely centered around the Tibetan Plateau, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of this region by relating its art and ideas to our shared human experience today. Inspired by the philosophical traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism and aligned with ongoing research into learning, behavior, and the brain, the Rubin offers innovative exhibitions and programs that examine provocative ideas across the arts and explore the mind. Through this work, the Museum serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation, opening windows to inner worlds so visitors can better navigate outer ones. www.RubinMuseum.org

MEDIA CONTACT

Sandrine Milet | Senior Manager, Communications & Marketing | 212-620-5000 x228
press@rubinmuseum.org

Image captions:

Top Left: *Lords of the Charnel Ground; Smashana Adipati*; Tibet; 18th century; painted terracotta; 6 1/2 x 5 1/8 x 1 1/2 in. (16.5 x 13 x 3.8 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; C2002.36.1 (HAR 65149); photography by David De Armas for the Rubin Museum of Art, 2012

Top Right: Unknown European artist; *A Woman Divided into Two, Representing Life and Death*; 1790–1820; oil painting; 16 5/16 x 14 in. (41.5 x 35.5 cm); Wellcome Collection, London; 45063i