

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

Flip Side Exhibition Reveals the Rarely Seen Texts and Images on the Reverse Of Tibetan Scroll Paintings, Sculptures, and Picture Cards

**On View March 15 through February 10 2014, Exhibition Features Exceptional Examples
of 13th through 19th Century Works**

March 7, 2013, New York, NY– On March 15, an exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art will for the first time reveal the backs of a select group of Tibetan scroll paintings (thangkas), sculptures, and picture cards. Making both sides of the works of art accessible, *Flip Side: The Unseen in Tibetan Art* will explore how what is found on the back helps to interpret the representations on the front of these works. From handprints of eminent masters to poems, from stupa drawings to devout wishes, from ornamental scripts to magic texts, the writings and visual representations on the back provide a rich array of information about the purposes and religious meanings of the works on display. On view through August 12, 2013, the exhibition mainly draws on the Rubin’s permanent collection and also features a select set of loans that have not been previously displayed.

“The reverse of an art object is crucial to our understanding of its religious meaning, its interpretation, and at times also of its position in history or location of production. As such, making works of art accessible from both sides provides a rare opportunity for the visitor to gain a deeper understanding of Tibetan religious customs and traditions,” said Rubin Museum Senior Curator Christian Luczanits. “In fact, any comprehensive study of Tibetan art has to include the back, as it gives clues about the content depicted on the front, its actual use, and the intention of the work’s creator. *Flip Side* is an opportunity for us to share a varied group of multifaceted and exquisite images in their entirety with our audiences, making them accessible in a new way.”

Arranged by key visual elements found on the reverse such as handprints of eminent Buddhist masters and depictions of stupas, architectural symbols representing the Buddha’s teachings, the exhibition features fifty-five works dating from the 13th to the 19th century. Among the works is a selection of twenty-nine picture cards used in esoteric rituals and a number of rare and unusual sculptures and paintings relating to important personages of Tibetan history. Examples from the exhibition include a thangka of **Shingkyong Raggyel**, a wealth deity, which remarkably includes four different handprints on the back, among them a child incarnation that allows dating the painting to about 1860 and a **19th-century thangka** depicting White Tara, a goddess of longevity, with a large representation of a stupa partially inscribed in gold and flanked by the handprints of a high Buddhist master.

From among the vast range of textual information contained on the reverse sides the following are also introduced in the exhibition:

Mantra: Sacred syllables and their combinations are a common feature of Hindu and Buddhist ritual practice, and their presence and pronunciation is thought to release specific powers. Mantras are used for

the purification of the materials used for a work of art, as well as its consecration, and they also represent the sound form of the deity represented. They are common on the backs of paintings but rare on sculptures, as on a fine gilt copper alloy sculpture of the 14th century, *Adibuddha Vajrasattva*. At times, as on a **13th-century thangka**, featuring the lives of the highly influential 12th-century scholar **Phagmodrupa**, they also provide crucial clues for the correct reading of the depictions on the front.

Consecration Verse: This ubiquitous verse references the core of the Buddha's teachings: the Four Noble Truths, which include the truth of suffering, of its origin, its cessation, and the path that leads to its cessation. Containing this ultimate Buddhist truth, the verse also has consecratory power and is thus often found on the back of works of art, as on an extraordinarily vibrant thangka of the protector **Black Maning**, or Black Eunuch, who holds a human heart to his snarling mouth. The consecration verse is found on the earliest works in the exhibition, as on an **unusual wooden tablet** painted on both sides and depicting a teaching Buddha seated on a double lotus on the front side and a stupa on the back.

Forbearance Verse: This verse stems from the final portion of the text on the rules of the monastic community. It serves as a reminder to Buddhist practitioners and may also be understood as a request for forgiveness for any mistakes in the associated depiction. On a unique **13th-century thangka painting** with **six masters** from India and Tibet, this verse is one of six quoted from the same source.

The exhibition will also feature a variety of unusual examples of *Picture Cards* from the 13th to the 15th century, which traditionally feature extensive writing on the back. A larger **group of 13th-century cards** are painted in gold and occasional accent colors on a red background, giving them a graphic quality rarely seen in Tibetan art.

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM:

The Rubin Museum of Art's immersive environment stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia. The only museum in the U.S. dedicated to the Himalayan region, the Rubin has welcomed more than one million visitors since its founding in 2004. Its outstanding collections of Chinese, Indian, Afghan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, Nepalese, Pakistani, and Tibetan art, which include photography, are complemented by a diverse array of films, on-stage conversations, concerts, and special events. The Museum's education, community, and access programming is dedicated to providing audiences of all ages and backgrounds with multidimensional experiences that foster dialogue and active engagement with the traditions and cultures of the Himalayas. The Rubin Museum's Café Serai and shop are also inspired by the region and serve as a natural extension of the gallery and programming experience.

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