



RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART

***WORLD'S LARGEST RECORDED HUMAN GATHERING –TENS OF MILLIONS
OF PILGRIMS -- CAPTURED BY PHOTOGRAPHER HANNES SCHMID***

EXHIBITION PRESENTS IMAGES OF FESTIVAL HELD ONCE EVERY 144 YEARS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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New York—As many as seventy-five million pilgrims assembled in Allahabad, North India for a month-long Maha Kumbh Mela festival from January to February 2001. It was the largest ever recorded gathering of human beings up to that time, and so immense that the crowd was visible from space.

Swiss artist Hannes Schmid was there as Hindu pilgrims moved towards the banks of the sacred Ganges River, capturing this massive pilgrimage with his camera. From July 22 to November 13, 2011 the Rubin Museum of Art will present Schmid's still and moving images of the festival during *Human Currents: The World's Largest Pilgrimage as Interpreted by Hannes Schmid*.

The Maha Kumbh Mela—the most important among Kumbh Mela festivals that celebrate gods' symbolic triumph over demons—is held only once every one hundred forty-four years. Pilgrims mark the festivals by travelling to sites along the banks of the Ganges River, and never more so than during the 2001 Maha Kumbh Mela when a veritable sea of devotees of all ages, castes, and classes traveled from every corner of India to participate. 28 million pilgrims were said to have gathered on the main bathing day alone.

“The day, when such a mass of pilgrims of all ages gather for a common purpose and destiny, has intrigued me for as long as I knew,” says photographer Hannes Schmid. “Driven by an enormous

religious power, there was absolutely nothing that could have stopped these pilgrims from fulfilling their vows.”

Schmid’s large C-print photographs capture the visual essence of this enormous act of faith. *Human Currents* will present seven of these images, along with an accompanying video installation, that bring to life the crushing, claustrophobic crowds, myriad colors, and frenetic energy of this greatest of Hindu pilgrimages.

“Schmid’s photographs have palpable energy. This coupled with their size—more than five by eight feet each—make for an experiential and visceral exhibition,” said curator Beth Citron. Visitors may enter the gallery and get a sense of how it might feel to be a part of the claustrophobic crowd inching its way towards the Ganges.”

Through October 24, 2011 visitors to the Rubin Museum can also explore the role of pilgrimage in three other of the world’s largest religious traditions in [*Pilgrimage and Faith: Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam*](#). *Pilgrimage and Faith* brings together nearly seventy objects reflecting pilgrims’ varied experiences related to visits to sacred sites. Dating from the 9th century to the present, the objects are of diverse function and artistic expression, from a Persian Quran ornately decorated with ink, watercolor, lapis lazuli, and gold, to Tibetan Buddhist prayer beads carved from bone.

History of Kumbh Mela Festivals

According to the myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, the world was once rife with misfortune. The gods were weakened and the demons turned their power against them. Vishnu instructed the gods to regain their power by churning the Ocean of Milk to recover the pitcher of the nectar of immortality, hidden in the ocean’s depths. Too weak to churn the ocean on their own, the gods promised the demons some of the nectar in exchange for their help. When the pitcher emerged, the demons took possession of it, causing the gods to relentlessly pursue them through the sky. As they battled, drops of the nectar fell to four places on earth. After a twelve day battle, the gods were successful in recapturing the pitcher of the nectar of immortality.

Since at least the seventh century A.D. pilgrims have celebrated the gods’ symbolic triumph over the demons by bathing in the rivers near the four locations where the nectar of immortality fell to

earth. Modern iterations of Kumbh Mela pilgrimages, as reflected in Schmid's images, are partially characterized by extreme crowding and physical discomforts.

The Kumbha Mela occurs in cycles of three, six, twelve, and one hundred forty-four years, rotating every three years to one of the four locations where the nectar of immortality fell to earth. An Ardh (half) Kumbha Mela takes place every six years in rotation at each of the four locations. A Purna (full) Kumbha Mela takes place every 12 years, and a Maha (great) Kumbha Mela occurs every 144 years.

The lack of consistent estimates of participants adds to the festival's lore. Estimates of individuals who participated in the 2001 Maha Kumbh Mela range by tens of millions—anywhere between 30 and 75 million people.

Hannes Schmid

The images Hannes Schmid (b. 1946) captured during the Maha Kumbh Mela build upon his lifelong photographic pursuit of unique events and grand personalities. Schmid captured the iconic Marlboro Man and many rock legends of the 1970s and 1980s. He was recently included in Brooklyn Museum's exhibition *Who Shot Rock: Photographers of Rock and Roll*.

Support

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Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art explores the rich cultural legacies of the Himalayas from a variety of perspectives. The museum's permanent collection includes paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture drawn from cultures that touch upon the arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes Iran, India, China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The museum has presented contemporary and historical photography exhibitions since opening in 2004. Past photography exhibitions have included works by [Kenro Izu](#), [Lynn Davis](#), and Matthieu Ricard, all of whom have photographed in the Himalayan region, or whose works reflect inspiration from Buddhist concepts.

The Rubin Museum of Art is located at 150 West 17 Street, between 6th and 7th Avenues. Open Monday 11am to 5pm, Wednesday 11am to 7pm, Thursday 11am to 5pm, Friday 11am to 10pm,

Saturday and Sunday from 11am to 6pm; closed on Tuesday. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street (8th Avenue); the 1 to 18th Street (7th Avenue); 2, 3 to 14th Street (7th Avenue); F, M, L to 14th Street (6th Avenue); and N, R, Q, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th Street (Union Square). By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.

Admission to the Rubin is \$10 for adults; \$5 for seniors; \$5 for students (with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children 12 and under, and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays from 6pm to 10pm.

For more information or images:

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