

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

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MIRROR OF THE BUDDHA

Highlight of Rubin Museum Season Focused on Narrative Paintings

New exhibition looks closely at the subjects of the stories told in paintings.

The primary subjects of Tibetan Buddhist paintings are images of the founding teachers of various schools and lineages. Beginning in the thirteenth century Tibetans began to exalt these lineage masters in portraits, using symbols of Indian Buddhist iconography to elevate their earthly forms and evoke the highest spiritual status, buddhahood. A new exhibition at the Rubin Museum, *Mirror of the Buddha: Early Portraits from Tibet* introduces the early painted portraits and some sculptures of Tibetan gurus in all their magnificence and variety. It opens Friday, October 21, and remains on view through March 5, 2012.

The exhibition is the third in a series of eight exhibitions and catalogs by the foremost scholar of Tibetan Buddhist painting, David Jackson. Jackson's current research focuses on the history of Tibetan painting as it can be reconstructed through inscriptions and representations of religious lineages from Tibetan primary sources. Treating paintings as historical documents, Jackson offers an unprecedented methodological approach to studying Tibetan art. He has examined and contextualized these objects and woven them into a rich historical narrative that provides many insights into the culture and art of Tibet and, in this exhibition, identifies the major players in the development of the Tibetan Buddhist religious traditions -- teachers, monks, students, and patrons of historical teaching lineages.

The exhibition can be seen concurrently with *Once Upon Many Times: Legends and Myths in Himalayan Art* until January 30, an exhibition that presents the variety of forms that tell stories of the Buddha, great teachers, legendary masters and their spiritual quests, and adventures of heroes painted in *thangkas*, murals, and told in front of portable shrines.

What do such ancient paintings mean to us today? According to Donald Rubin, co-founder and co-chair of the board of the Rubin Museum, “When we look at the portraits of teachers presented in the exhibition, we feel that we know them because of the human features depicted -- balding heads, peculiar facial hair, or protruding teeth. They look like people we might have met just yesterday. And in feeling that connection, we receive the inspiration they offer us -- great saints all of them -- reaching across time and space.” Chief Curator Jan Van Alphen added, “David Jackson fully explores this notion of guru worship and its artistic outcomes, noting the conflicting tendencies present in such paintings—depicting the idealized saint and the recognizable human teacher at the same time.”

Mirror of the Buddha includes portraits of the founders and teachers in all of the Tibetan Buddhist schools. Six Tibetan Buddhist sects are represented in all, in rough chronological order. They begin with the Kadam School, followed by Taklung, Drigung Kagyu, Karma Kagyu, Sakya, and Geluk traditions. Within each school, the paintings are ordered chronologically. Grouping the art by religious tradition allows the visitor to observe broad pan-Tibetan stylistic developments. It also highlights a few cases of striking sectarian stylistic preferences.

Dating between roughly 1200 and 1550, the images chosen for presentation exemplify two classic Indic styles of Tibetan painting. Most are in the East-Indian inspired Sharri (“Pala”) style, characterized by classic Indian forms, delicate colors, and intricate decorative details. Though this style spread from India to many parts of Asia, it was emulated most faithfully by Tibetans, enjoying its highest popularity in Tibet from the twelfth to fourteenth century. A number of the later portraits are in the Nepalese-inspired Beri style, which succeeded the Sharri in Tibet in the mid-fourteenth century.

Kadam School

The Kadam School is the earliest of the Tibetan Buddhist schools and was founded by Tibetan followers of the Indian teacher Atisha (982–1054), who visited Tibet as a missionary during the peak of his career. Though he did not found any monasteries in Tibet, Atisha inspired his Tibetan disciples to devote themselves to Buddhist practice.

In early Tibetan paintings, the presence of Atisha together with his main Tibetan disciple, the lay adherent Dromton (1005–1064), is often the key to identifying it as a work of the Kadam School. This pair exemplifies two very different iconographic types—the Indian monk-scholar and the Tibetan layman—and they thus provide great insight into understanding the distinction between monks and laymen and Tibetans and Indians in Tibetan Buddhist human portraiture. The exhibition includes a late 11th-century or early 12th-century painting from the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in which Atisha is identified by his yellow pointed hat, the mark of an Indian Buddhist scholar. In his left hand he holds a small Indian palm-leaf manuscript (*pustaka*) of sacred Buddhist scripture, a possible accoutrement of a learned Indian master. Dromton is depicted in a 12th-century painting from a private collection. He is shown wearing Tibetan lay dress and the long hair of a lay person.

Taklung Kagyu School

The Taklung Kagyu tradition combined in its teachings and practices the tantric instructions of the great Buddhist teacher Marpa with the Kadam School lineage teachings of Atisha. In the art of this school we find clearer examples of portraits that exalted their human subjects to the level of buddhas. That phenomenon first spread widely in Tibet in the 13th century, especially in the circles of the Kagyu master Phagmotrupa and his disciples. This section includes portraits of Phagmotrupa, Phagmotrupa's disciple, Taklungthangpa; and later Taklung teachers.

The Taklung Kagyu was a minor tradition among the Tibetan Buddhist schools. However, the art of this school represents a disproportionately large percentage of early paintings in Western collections. This can be attributed to the survival of many paintings at the school's main monastery, Riwoche, including some that were probably brought there by the monastery's founder.

A 13th-century painting from the Rubin Museum's collection is a perfect example of early portraits of Phagmotrupa who can be easily identified by his distinctive beard and mustache. It depicts him surrounded by minor figures, including tantric deities and scene of his previous lives.

Drigung Kagyu

Among the Drigung Kagyu and Karma Kagyu examples are portraits made to pay respect to a great guru through painting and revering his footprints. One example dating to 1200, from the Rubin Museum's collection, *Drigung Kyoppa's Footprints*, painted in thin washes of dye or ink, is described by curator David Jackson as "the Rosetta stone of a small corpus of early Drigung Kagyü paintings, revealing through inscriptions the names of many obscure minor figures." Through close reading of the images and partial inscriptions, Jackson has been able to identify the guru, his teacher, and his patron. The footprints, like several other footprints on early Drigung Kagyü paintings, show the presence of a bunion-like condition. Their distinctive shape confirms that they all originated from the same highly revered founding guru, Kyoppa Jigten Gönpö of Drigung.

The damaged inscription at the painting's base mentions a certain Gompa Rinchen Dorje, evidently the patron who devotedly commissioned this painting. It also names his teacher, "the revered guru and Lord of Dharma Rinchen Pal," as Jigten Gönpö was known to his students.

Karma Kagyu

The late 12th century *Early Karmapa with Footprints*, also from the Rubin Museum collection, belongs to the Karma Kagyu School, judging by the special black hat that its main figure wears. It exemplifies the simplest and probably earliest-known painting of a founding master of that school. It pays homage to the black-hatted master shown above the footprints, who is presumably the First Karmapa, Düsum Khyenpa (1110-1193). The painting also pays respect to the master by means of the broad parasol above and the auspicious objects that were placed within the undulating

vine that grows from below. The parasol is an ancient Indian Buddhist iconographic element and way of auspiciously paying homage.

Sakya School

The fifth main Tibetan Buddhist school whose portraits are exhibited in the exhibition is the Sakya. The first great patriarch of Sakya – Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158) is represented by a 17th-century painting from a private collection. His successors and gurus of one of the lineages that he transmitted – his sons, grandson and great-grandson are also depicted in the painting. The Sakya portraits presented here are considerably later than those of the Kagyu Schools, dating to the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. All are in the Nepal-inspired Beri style, for Sakya lay in western Tsang Province, not far from the Nepalese border and thus relatively close to Kathmandu, home of the Newari artists who originated the Beri style.

Geluk School

The last Tibetan Buddhist school whose paintings are presented in the exhibition is the Geluk. The tradition derives from the teachings of its founder, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419), an outstanding scholastic and saint from Amdo who came for his studies as a young man to central Tibet and became a prominent teacher there, never returning home. In Tibet, portraits of Tsongkhapa eventually became the most widespread images of any religious teacher. Especially after his school gained political predominance in a Tibetan theocracy in the mid-17th century, the portraits of its founders became both common and repetitive. But before that, in the first few generations of his school's existence, we find much variation among his painted portraits.

Works of art have been lent to the exhibition by the Brooklyn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Musée Guimet, The Phoenix Art Museum, and many private collections.

Support

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HERO, VILLAIN, YETI: TIBET IN COMICS

How Tibet figures in storytelling of a different variety—comic books—is the subject of another upcoming exhibition at the Rubin Museum, *Hero, Villain, Yeti: Tibet in Comics*, opening December 9, 2011. This exhibition continues the Rubin Museum's exploration of Himalayan narratives and looks at the ways in which comic book storylines have drawn on the cultural and religious traditions of Tibet for more than 60 years, mixing real knowledge with long-held myths and stereotypes. Featuring more than 50 comic books from around the world—the most complete collection of comics related to Tibet ever assembled—it sheds light on global perceptions of Tibet, human interest in superheroes and paradisiacal places, and the perpetuation of stereotypes about the country and its people.

Hero, Villain, Yeti is a compelling example of the museum's dedication to illuminating the common threads that exist between traditional Himalayan art and ideas and those of the present day.

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM

The Rubin Museum of Art holds one of the world's most important collections of Himalayan art. Paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are 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 explores these rich cultural legacies—largely unfamiliar to Western viewers—from a variety of perspectives, offering multiple entry-points for understanding and enjoying the art of the Himalayas.

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