



RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART

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**NEW EXHIBITION TELLS THE FANTASTIC TALES
OF HIMALAYAN ART IN ITS MANY FORMS**

Highlight of Rubin Museum Season Focused on Narrative

*Other Programs Include Exhibition of Comics Set in Tibet and Public Rehearsal
of New Peter Sellars Dramatization of First Narrative Buddhist Sutra*

New York -- The Buddha multiplies his bodies in a contest of magical powers; a perfect monk appears riding a tiger; master meditators sing songs as teachings to the others; and rainbow colored lights fill the sky while flowers rain down on amazed spectators – these are just some of the scenes that are depicted in the Himalayan painted and sculpted narratives on display in an exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art from September 16, 2011 – January 30, 2012.

For all of its strict adherence to proscribed visual conventions, Himalayan art is some of the most fantastic in the world. *Once Upon Many Times: Legends and Myths in Himalayan Art* presents the many themes and forms of Himalayan narratives, as varied as their visual expressions.

The exhibition—featuring 44 works of art from the 9th to the 20th century that depict life stories of the Buddha, great teachers and legendary masters, explored in relation to themes of spiritual quests and heroic adventures—is part of a season of programs at the Museum focused on Himalayan narratives. In December there will be an exhibition of more than 50 comic books from around the world featuring Tibetan heroes and

adventures. On September 30 and October 1, the director Peter Sellars, actress Kate Valk, and dancer Michael Schumacher will stage a public rehearsal of a dramatization of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the earliest narrative sutra in the Buddhist canon.

The objects included in *Once Upon Many Times* take a variety of forms, from the traditional Tibetan scroll paintings (*thangkas*) and Nepalese banner paintings, to sculptures and manuscripts, a portable shrine, and reproductions of elaborate murals. The exhibition presents its own Himalayan narrative by showing that these works of art are actual stories in a pictorial form, creative adaptations of the Buddhist lore developed over a period of a thousand years, as well as examples of specific artistic traditions.

These facets of the Himalayan narratives are explored in several layers of interpretation. The introductory section texts broadly outline thematic categories. Each work of art is accompanied by explanatory text describing both the content of the narrative, and the narrative's artistic representation. The object descriptions are occasionally aided by graphic cards, which map the visual narratives. A brochure summarizes and connects the main themes throughout the exhibition. Visitors' gallery experiences will be enhanced by an extensive audio tour.

Additionally, an explore area provides interactive computer-based presentations allowing visitors to discover detailed sections of select narrative paintings and their stories. A brief video of a Tibetan storyteller in action offers the context for the practice of popular narrative performances.

The traditional stories related to the Buddha are found throughout Buddhist literature and art. The Tibetan visual culture is not an exception. Numerous Tibetan paintings often created as sets tell the stories of the Buddha's life, his previous lives, and his teachings. Some, as rare as the painting from a private collection of the Eight Great Events of the Buddha's Life shown in this exhibition, allow visitors to glimpse at the connections between the developing Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the Indian Buddhist culture during the 12th and 13th centuries. Other paintings in the exhibition show mature Tibetan

compositions with multiple narrative scenes cleverly arranged around the central figure of the Buddha and inscribed with captions. Yet others show well-known stories with moral teachings painted as identifiable vignettes and structured as landscapes in a series of paintings.

Numerous life stories of Tibetan Buddhist masters were modeled upon the Buddha's spiritual quest for enlightenment. Inspirational and often mythologized they also incorporated historical narratives. Such paintings were part of the making of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions just as much as literary biographical writings and histories. Analogous to the stories from the Buddha's life about his superhuman powers, legendary accounts of Buddhist masters' lives also include stories of miracles and remarkable accomplishments. The exhibition shows several examples of such visual representations related to the lives of Tibetan Buddhist masters.

Historically, illustrated and performed narratives were of particular importance in the Himalayas. In Tibetan areas, for example, teaching storytellers called *manipas* would employ both kinds of narratives as they traveled from place to place with their scroll paintings. In Bhutan they would use portable shrines, or *tashi gomang*, to illustrate their recitations of the stories of the legendary teachers, the Buddhist king, and other popular tales containing moral teachings to gathered crowds. The exhibition includes one such portable shrine, whose tiny clay representations of deities and historical and legendary figures are revealed when the shrine's many doors open in advent calendar-style.

Other forms of performed popular narratives such as operas were also represented in richly illustrated visual form. Of particular note in *Once Upon Many Times* are three life-size reproductions of the 17th- 18th century murals from the Lukhang, the Dalai Lama's Secret Temple. Created with new photographic methods by Thomas Laird and Clint Clemens, this display of large-format, high-resolution pigment prints provides even better access to the paintings than is possible in the temple itself. The two large murals represent scenes of the Tibetan dramas *Drowa Sangmo* and *Pema Ombar*. Each is painted

in elaborately devised compositions spread over two walls and captioned. The third, from another part of the Lukhang Temple, depicts the king of the mythical land of Shambhala.

Once Upon Many Times includes a substantial number of works from the Rubin Museum's permanent collection, as well as loans from the Nelson-Atkins Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and several private collections.

THE VIMALAKIRTI SUTRA

In a unique public program to mark the exhibition, the Rubin Museum of Art has invited the American theater director Peter Sellars to present public rehearsals of a new work based on the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the earliest teaching in the Buddhist canon. Sellars's dramatization will feature the dancer Michael Schumacher and Wooster Group founder Kate Valk as the lead interpreters. Performances will take place on Friday, September 30, and Saturday, October 1, at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$25.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* dates from the first century CE, a watershed moment in Buddhist history that brought sacred teachings out of the monasteries and into the streets, and out of classical and academic language and into the vernacular. The work is characterized by humor and a radical, democratizing aspect that powerfully and pointedly addresses equal rights for women and an inclusive world of spiritually charged reciprocity that levels all hierarchies. The text is written in dialogue form and upends many long-established tropes of the Buddhist canon while concentrating on miracles – the unimaginable, the inconceivable – which we are invited to imagine and embody.

Sellars said, “The *Vimalakirti Sutra* with its outrageous humor, irreverent tone, and startling spectacle, was intended to be staged for an illiterate audience in fairgrounds, marketplaces and at festival days, bringing the most refined and radical concepts of Buddhism to a working-class public; putting the most sacred teachings not only in the hands of a clerical aristocracy, but spreading them with pleasure and ease to a population that knew life's struggles firsthand.”

On Wednesday, September 28, at 7:00 p.m. Columbia University Buddhism scholar Robert Thurman, who translated the text, and Peter Sellars will debate the meaning of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*.

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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