



RUBIN  
MUSEUM  
OF ART

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***RUBIN MUSEUM EXHIBITION OF TIBETAN CARPETS  
SHOWCASES IMPORTANT FOLK ART TRADITION***

New York – For centuries Tibetans have used carpets for decorative and functional purposes, drawing upon geometric patterns, auspicious symbols, real and mythical animals, and natural imagery to create beautiful, colorful designs. From April 8 – August 22, 2011 *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets* will present some forty carpets that showcase the stylistic variety and uses of Tibetan carpets, alongside paintings, sculptures and everyday objects that echo their imagery and illuminate their utility.

Traditional Tibetan fine art is synonymous with religious art, and requires strict adherence to stylistic and religious guidelines. Tibetan carpets, on the other hand, were first used for secular, utilitarian purposes, and therefore allow for a greater range of artistic expression and subject matter. Many carpets are woven with fantastical designs that draw upon folk tales and local lore, making it one of the more accessible art forms to emerge from Tibet.

To enliven their otherwise bleak environment, Tibetans often use rich, warm colors wherever possible. Indigenous mineral and plant sources were traditionally used to create a variety of dyes – including madder root for red, walnut husks for brown, and turmeric and barberry for yellow.

Wealthy patrons could afford imported indigo dyes from India and a Bhutanese scarlet dye known as *lac*, collected from insect secretions. These dyes were then applied, typically, to wool to create colorful carpets used as mats for sleeping, cushions for saddles, and a means to welcome visitors to sit down and enjoy tea.

Despite Tibet's notoriously treacherous terrain, foreign traders—including Manchurians, Indians, Bhutanese, and Bengalis—have traveled through the region for centuries. *Patterns of Life* includes numerous examples of the influence of foreign trade on Tibetan carpet makers. One early 20<sup>th</sup>-century carpet speaks to the influence of the pan-Asian silk trade, with its distinctly Chinese script and a phoenix design copied from imported textiles, and a trefoil border that is reminiscent of Central Asian felt appliqué techniques. Going back even further, Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci noted the early contact between Tibetan and the Iranian cultures through migration and trade that resulted in the exchange of artistic and decorative traditions between the two cultures. The unusual cut-loop technique used in Tibetan rugs past and present—a technique now found solely in Tibet—is also found in ancient Egyptian and Central Asian weavings.

### ***Carpet uses***

*Patterns of Life* includes a range of carpet types, from the humblest to the most lavish. Small pile rug pillows and woven covers for cushions or pillows, both rare and both represented in *Patterns of Life*, were reserved for the affluent or members of the clergy.

Sleeping rugs, called *khaden*, on the other hand, were found in every Tibetan home and monastery, regardless of class. Less affluent Tibetans may have used only one rug, while wealthier Tibetans might have piled six or seven rugs atop one another for sleeping. The exhibition offers a number of examples of a *khaden*, one of which features a talismanic design border intended to protect the sleeper.

Tibet's horse culture has inspired a number of types of utilitarian weavings, the most prolific of which are saddle carpets. These are always designed as pairs: a larger rug for placing under the saddle, and a smaller rug to place atop the saddle to serve as a cushion. The vast majority of saddle carpet pairs are separated and sold at different times and places, but *Patterns of Life* includes two rare intact sets. Though Tibetans had been creating and using saddle carpets for

generations, examples with flared, rounded ends are easily datable to post-1904 when Britain invaded Tibet. The exhibition presents three such butterfly-shaped versions fashioned after the saddle clothes used by British troops. A saddle carpet set placed atop a Tibetan saddle of wood, hide, iron, fur, and cloth on loan from the American Museum of Natural History provides visitors with a realistic depiction of how these carpets would have been used in everyday life.

### ***Monastic carpets***

Though originally created for domestic utility, the ruling clergy and landed gentry eventually began sponsoring carpet production for their own use, and carpets served important functions in monastic communities just as they did in secular ones. Typically, monastic halls and monks' and lamas' living quarters were filled with weavings that were either donated or, in the case of more affluent monasteries, commissioned. Carpets intended for ecclesiastic use tend to be distinct from those created for the secular sphere. Monastic communities encouraged strict adherence to tradition, and the colors red, orange and yellow were reserved exclusively for monastic weavings. Still, carpet makers exercised a degree of artistic license, as can be seen in an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century carpet featuring typical red *swastikas* (Sanskrit for 'auspicious,' the swastika is an ancient symbol that predates the Nazi appropriation by thousands of years) and a red outer border, but also small, purely decorative flowers, an example of Buddhist iconography fused with artistic fancy.

Many Tibetan homes would have owned seating mats, or *khagangma*, reserved for visiting lamas or other high-ranking members of the monastic community who would pass through communities while on pilgrimage. Often featuring a tigerskin pattern, these mats would have been used to mark the spot where an honored guest was intended to sit. While in their monastic halls, monks and lamas were shielded from the elements by heavy, coarsely-knotted rugs that hung from the halls' large entryways. Two such door carpets will be on view in the exhibition.

### ***Designs***

Tibetan carpet designs range from the religious to the fanciful. Buddhist symbols—such as the *vajra* which represents the indestructible and impenetrable state of enlightenment, the endless knot symbolizing the endless cycle of life, and the ancient auspicious swastika—appear frequently.

Geometric patterns, like medallions, often reflect the influence of Central Asian weavings. The checkerboard design is a common one in Tibetan rugs, but is found less often in rugs from other weaving cultures through Central Asia and the Near East. One rather roughly-woven geometric-patterned carpet in the exhibition is typical of a nomadic carpet.

Animals—some real, some mythical—are frequently represented in Tibetan carpets. Phoenixes are often paired with dragons, considered a demonic creature in other Central Asian cultures, but considered a benevolent one by Tibetans. Cranes, a symbol of good luck, are also common, as are snow lions, Tibet's most beloved mythical animal and symbolic guardian. Despite their prevalence in Tibetan painting, elephants are rarely seen in Tibetan rugs, but *Patterns of Life* includes one of these rare depictions in an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century carpet that depicts four auspicious animals.

The use of tiger pelts was once common throughout Asia as an indication of one's social status, wealth, and political or ecclesiastical power. Textiles simulating tiger pelts and images of tigers are popular and represented in a number of carpets in the exhibition, as is an extremely rare weaving featuring a leopard skin design.

*Patterns of Life* presents the shared visual language between Tibetan carpets and Tibetan fine art through related paintings and sculptures from the museum's collection. Works on view include an 18<sup>th</sup>-century snow lion repoussé sculpture that offers a three-dimensional view of this mythical creature commonly represented in Tibetan carpets, and a painting depicting Green Tara surrounded by flora, cranes, deer, a dragon, geometric architectural elements, and stylized landscapes that harkens back to numerous carpet motifs on display.

### **About the Rubin Museum of Art**

RMA 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. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

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

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. The Rubin Museum of Art is located at 150 West 17<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and M to 14th Street; N, R, Q, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street. For more information on RMA please visit [www.rmanyc.org](http://www.rmanyc.org) or the public may call 212-620-5000.