

# Marvelous Mandalas

## Pre-Visit Lesson Plan

### Overview

Mandalas are a rich part of the art and cultures of Himalayan Asia. This pre-visit lesson focuses on these compelling geometric forms frequently depicted in Buddhist art. Students will examine and decode images of mandalas and explore their geometric and symbolic elements.

**Goals**— Students will be able to:

- examine and decode Buddhist mandalas
- identify and understand the symbolic elements found in mandalas
- make connections between these images and their own lives by designing a personal mandala

### Subject Areas

Visual Arts, English Language Arts, World History, Math

### Grades

Elementary School, Middle School, High School

### Key Vocabulary

- **Symbol:** something that represents or stands for something else
- **Deity:** god or goddess, celestial being,
- **Buddhism:** a belief system based on the teachings of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, focusing on the attainment of release from an endless cycle of death and rebirth through enlightenment, or spiritual awakening.
- **Mandala:** A Sanskrit word that can be translated as 'circle.'

### Materials Needed

Visit [rmanyc.org/pre-visit](http://rmanyc.org/pre-visit) for downloadable lesson plans and class handouts.

- Handout: map of Himalayan Asia (p. 5)
- Handout: full-page image of  
**Mandala of Avalokiteshvara** (p.6)
- Handout: mandala template (p. 7)
- Pencils, colored pencils, or crayons

### Common Core Standards: ELA & History

1. College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for **Speaking and Listening**, including *comprehension and collaboration*, and *presentation of knowledge and ideas*.
2. College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for **Language**, including *conventions of standard English*, *knowledge of language*, and *vocabulary acquisition and use*.

### National Standards

1. Visual Arts: Choosing and Evaluating a Range of Subject Matter, Symbols, and Ideas
2. Visual Arts: Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures
3. English Language Arts: Communication Skills
4. English Language Arts: Multicultural Understanding
5. English Language Arts: Applying Language Skills

### New York State Standards

**Arts, Social Studies, Global History, and English as a Second Language**

1. Creating, Performing and Participating in the Arts
2. Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources
3. Responding to Analyzing Works of Art
4. Understanding the Cultural Dimensions and Contributions of the Arts

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The Sanskrit word **mandala** can be roughly translated as ‘circle,’ and most mandalas feature geometric patterns of circles and squares radiating out from a central point. Buddhist mandalas incorporate many layers of symbolism, and can be found in paintings, sculptures, textiles, and even architecture. The structure of a mandala can be thought of as a map or a blueprint; it is essentially a bird’s-eye view of a palace.

In Tibetan Buddhism, a mandala represents the home of a deity. This deity can be found in the center of its mandala surrounded by attendant figures radiating out from the center. Moving outward from the central circle, we find a square with four **gateways** on each of its sides. Each gateway is guarded by a pair of **makaras**—mythical sea monsters. Around this square, the largest circle is composed of a ring of five alternating colors, representing a **moat** of rainbow fire protecting the palace.

The number five is symbolically significant. There are five directions to each palace (north, east, south, west, and center) and five main colors used at each direction (green, blue, yellow, red, and white). Each color corresponds to one of the primary elements as well (air, water, earth, fire, and space).

Mandalas are made to be religious tools for visualization. Practitioners practice constructing each mandala palace in their mind, and visualize themselves moving from outside to the center, joining the deity in their place of power.



Moat of rainbow fire

Gateway, guarded by two makaras

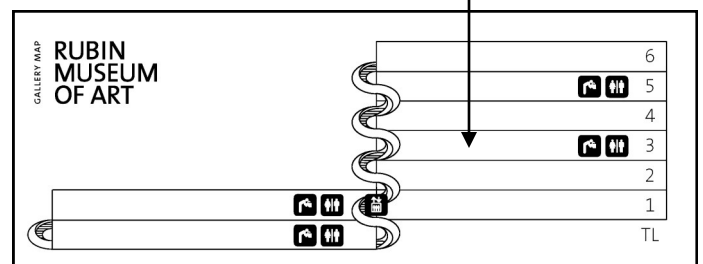
Attending Figures

Central Deity

**Where is it?** You’ll find this painting on the **3rd floor** of the museum, in the exhibition, ***Masterworks: Jewels of the Collection.***

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### Lesson Flow (40 minutes)

- Use map of Himalayan Asia (p. 5) to identify the countries and geography that make up this region.
- Briefly introduce Buddhism, if appropriate.
- Invite students to quietly examine the image of the mandalas (p. 6) before engaging in a group discussion of the following questions:
  1. What details do you see in this painting that make you curious?
  2. Gather a list of words that you could use to describe this mandala.
  3. What shapes do you find? What are the predominate colors?

### Content information and further examination (10-15 minutes)

- After students have made several observations, share some information about mandalas from p.2.
- Introduce the concept of the mandala as a blueprint for a castle. Highlight some familiar features of castles like gateways, mythical beasts, attending figures, and a central figure or ruler.
- Ask students look at the mandala again with this new information in mind.
- 4. How does this new information affect what you see in these mandalas?
- 5. What more can you find?

### Activity

Ask students to imagine their own personal mandala that represents an ideal space.

- What would their palace look like?
- What elements of protection will they use?
- Who will be in the center of their mandala?

Ask students to draw their idea, using the Mandala template (p. 7) as a base.

Get creative! Remember to refer back to the Buddhist mandala when students share out their work.

### Assessment

- ◆ In what ways did students demonstrate familiarity with the Himalayan region?
- ◆ What aspects of the Mandala did students identify in discussions?
- ◆ How did students use the symbolism of traditional Buddhist protection to create their personal Mandalas?

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## Pre-Visit Lesson Plan

### Online Resources for Further Learning

[www.rmanyc.org/schools](http://www.rmanyc.org/schools)

#### School Programs at the Rubin Museum of Art

Browse and learn about the different programs the museum has to offer for K–12 students and teachers

[www.rmanyc.org/masterworks](http://www.rmanyc.org/masterworks)

#### Masterworks: Jewels of the Collection

Explore exhibition resources related to the museum's permanent Masterworks exhibition.

[www.rmanyc.org/gateway](http://www.rmanyc.org/gateway)

#### Gateway to Himalayan Art

Explore exhibition resources related to the museum's permanent Gateway exhibition.

<http://www.googleartproject.com/collection/rubin-museum-of-art>  
Google Art Project

Journey into the Rubin's collection like never before, and create & share your own collections of art online .

<http://interactive.rma2.org/>

#### Educational Interactive Library

Explore the museum's in-gallery interactive software on this website.

[www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org)

#### Himalayan Art Resources

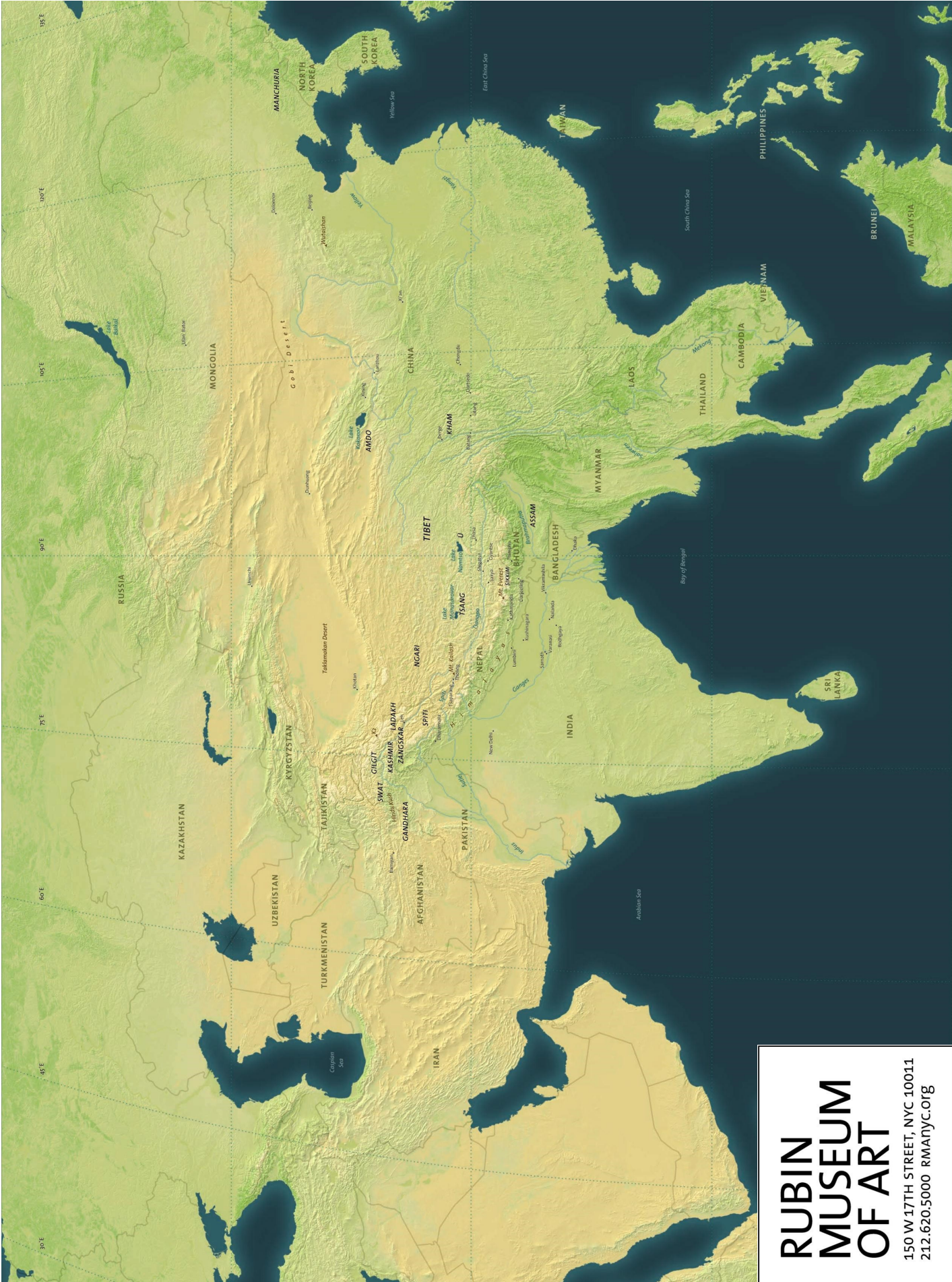
Search a virtual museum of high-resolution images, essays, articles, bibliographies, and activities for children.

### Reading Resources for Further Learning

- Beer, Robert. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003
- Powers, J. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2007.
- Strong, J.S. *The Experience of Buddhism*. Belmont, C.A.: Wadsworth, 1995.

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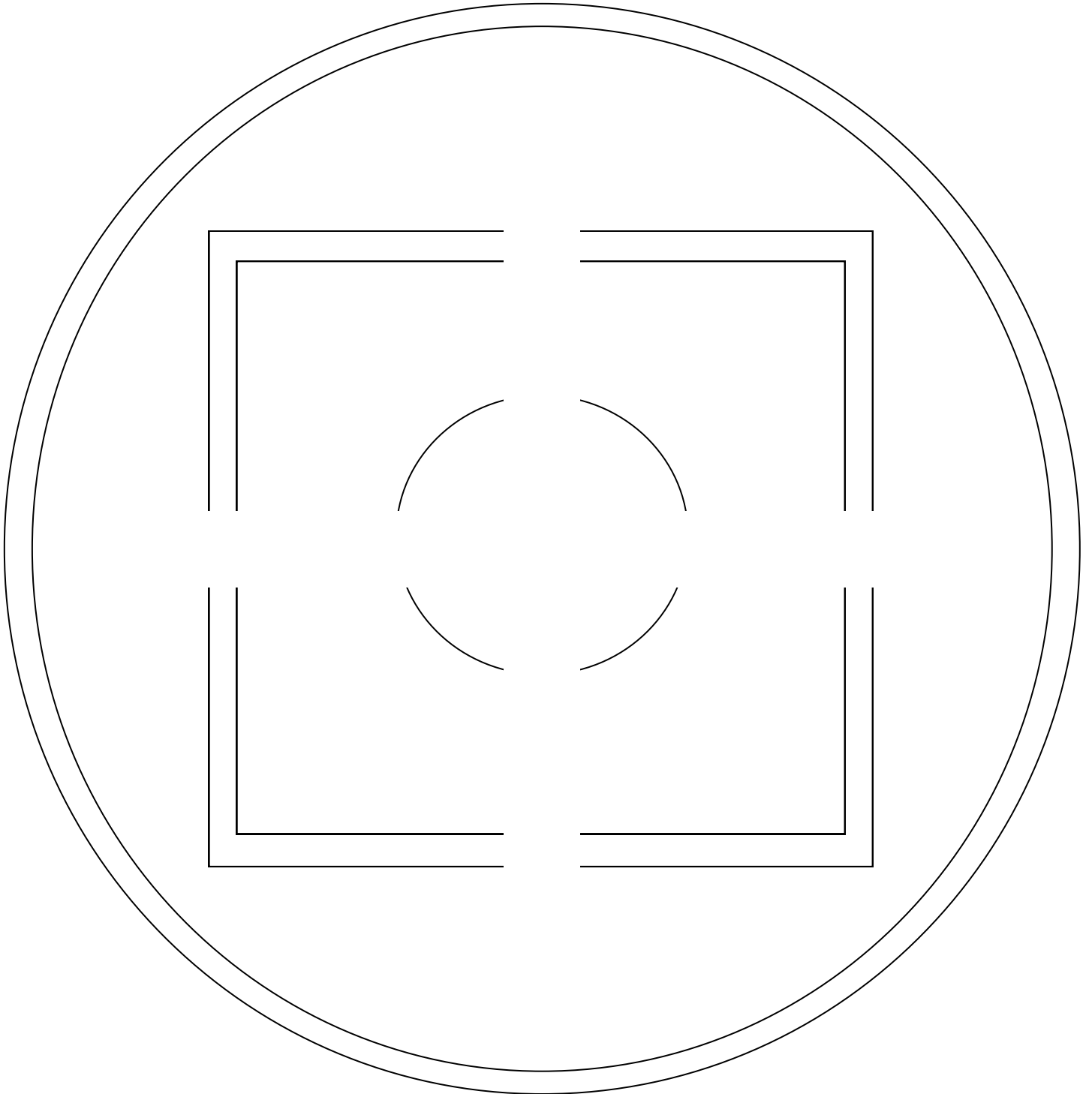
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# Mandala



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Name: