

# GATEWAY TO HIMALAYAN ART

## UNIVERSITY RESOURCE GUIDE

*Gateway to Himalayan Art* identifies the principal figures, materials, ritual practices, geography, and contextual setting of the sacred traditions of the Himalayan region. It provides an introduction to the art of Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Northern India, Mongolia, and Western China through five thematic sections: The Map; Figures and Symbols; Materials and Techniques; Purpose and Function; and The Tibetan Shrine Room.

## THE MAP



The Himalayan region covers a vast swath of territory over 1,600 miles long. Home to the highest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest, this region has experienced tremendous shifts of population, political allegiances and boundaries over the millennia. As information and ideas passed along trade routes, cultures of stunning diversity and complexity developed.

### Discussion question:

How might the geographical information provided on this particular map help to explain the cultural diversity and complexity of the Himalayan region?

### Discussion response:

The towering peaks of the Himalayan mountain range and Tibetan Plateau have thwarted political and economic cohesion in the region. This has also led to many rich pockets of cultural diversity.

## FIGURES AND SYMBOLS: BUDDHA

Buddhism developed 2,500 years ago in northern India. The term buddha, meaning “awakened” or “enlightened,” was first used to refer to Shakyamuni, or Siddhārtha Gautama, whose teachings became the foundation of Buddhism. Shakyamuni became the Buddha by achieving enlightenment, or a complete understanding of the true nature of reality, which freed him from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Over time “buddha” came to refer to not only one person but all manifestations of enlightenment.



**Buddha Shakyamuni,  
Tibet; 13<sup>th</sup> Century  
Buddhist Lineage  
Metal, Gilt Copper Alloy with  
Pigment  
Collection of Rubin Museum of Art  
HAR 65454**

The figure in this sculpture represents the Buddha Shakyamuni, “The sage of the Shakya clan,” who lived in the late 6<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.E., and had a profound awakening while meditating under the Bodhi tree.

### Discussion Question:

The Buddha Shakyamuni is traditionally depicted with distinctive physical features and gestures that tell the story of his spiritual awakening (enlightenment). Can you identify them?

### Discussion Responses:

- **Earth-touching mudra:** When the Buddha attained a spiritual awakening, he touched the earth to witness it. This mudra (gesture) represents the moment when Siddhartha Gautama, who was once a Hindu prince, became the Buddha.
- **Ushnisha:** According to tradition, when the Buddha became enlightened, a cranial protuberance grew at the top of his head because the size of his brain increased.
- **Long earlobes:** When Siddhartha was a young Hindu prince, he wore heavy earrings that stretched his earlobes.
- **Urna:** The tuft of hair between the eyebrows that illustrates radiant wisdom.

## MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

## Display Case: Hollow Metal Casting of Tara

One method for making religious sculpture in the Himalayas is through a technique called hollow metal casting, a method that still thrives in the Himalaya region today. This large display case shows how Nepalese artisans have constructed a bronze sculpture of Green Tara in multiple stages.



### Discussion question:

After examining the first four steps in the case, focus your attention on the Tara in step 5. What differences do you see between the left and right side of Tara?

### Discussion response:

When the metal sculpture is first removed from the clay mold, the surface is rough. The qualities that give Tara her beauty and vitality, the inlaid jewels and polished surface of her body, are made during a process called cold chiseling.

# TARA, MOTHER OF ALL ACTIVITIES

Green Tara is one of the most beloved deities in Himalayan and Central Asian Buddhist traditions. Known as the “savior,” she protects travelers from danger and provides comfort from fear. There are a total of twenty-one different forms of Tara within Tibetan Buddhism. Each form is associated with a specific color and purpose. These are some of the most popular:



- **Green Tara:** Alleviates fear, provides vitality, protects from danger.
- **White Tara:** Promotes good health and pacifism.
- **Yellow Tara :** Promotes a generosity, success in spiritual practice, wealth.
- **Red Tara :** Power, dedication, and overcoming obstacles that White and Yellow Tara cannot.
- **Black Tara:** Intensity, wrath, forceful perseverance.

**Green Tara, Mother of All Activities**  
**Tibet: 13<sup>th</sup> Century**  
**Metal, Silver Inlay**  
**Stone Inset: Coral, Turquoise**  
**Collection of Rubin Museum of Art**  
**HAR 65453**

## Discussion question:

This Tibetan sculpture of Tara was made eight-hundred years ago, whereas the Nepalese Tara, in the Materials and Techniques section, was made recently. The similarities and differences between the two pieces illustrate both thematic connections and aesthetic diversity of art across Himalayan cultures. What are some of the similarities and differences?

## Discussion Response:

### Similarities:

The pose of the sculptures is the same. Tara extends her right foot and right hand to offer help to all those in need. She holds an utpala flowers in her left hand.

### Differences:

The bodies and facial features are quite different. The Tibetan Tara has a round face, wide eyes, and full-formed body. The Nepalese Tara, in contrast, has a thinner face, a longer nose, and a more slender body.

## THE TIBETAN SHRINE ROOM



### Activity and Engagement:

Stand quietly in front of the Shrine Room for at least one minute. Describe how the space makes you feel. How was the space designed to make you feel that way?

- Direct your attention to the center of the altar where a large statue of the Buddha sits framed by two smaller statues. How does looking at the Buddha in this context change your perception of it as compared to looking at the Buddha you saw earlier in the Museum?
- Look at the five small, golden statues standing in a row beneath the central Buddha. These are dedicated to the five senses. Think about how the five senses, sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing, allow you to interact with the room. How do the five senses come together to enhance your sixth sense, that of the mind?
- Now exit the Shrine Room and turn left towards the interactive touch screens. Use one of these screens to learn about the Buddha, the five senses, as well as other highlighted objects.
- Before you leave, be sure to listen to the audio guide.

# Resources for Further Learning

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## Web Resources

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

**Gateway to Himalayan Art**//Explore exhibition resources to further discover the principal concepts of Himalayan art through interactive multi-media and didactic materials.

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

**The Rubin Museum of Art**//Explore Multimedia resources and videos to find out about present and upcoming exhibition and programs at the Rubin Museum of Art.

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

**Explore Art**// Journey behind works of Himalayan art on this interactive site, revealing the stories, ideas and beliefs that inspired them. The site also lets visitors consider how peoples of other culture have expressed ideas on similar issues through their own artistic traditions.

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

**Himalayan Art Resources**//Search a virtual museum of documented Himalayan art that includes high-resolution images, essays, articles, thematic collections, bibliographies, and activities for children.

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

**Treasury of Lives: Biographies of Himalayan Buddhist Masters**//Browse biographies and portraits of Tibetan Buddhist and Bon masters by religious tradition, geography, community, and historic period.

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