

PRESS RELEASE

Unique Set of Paintings Illustrating Tibetan Buddhist Meditation Comes to Light at the Rubin Museum of Art this Fall

First U.S. Exhibition of Important Album Depicting Sacred Visualization Practice Features Evidence of Distinctive Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolian Cross-Cultural Exchange



New York, NY (October 3, 2014) — This fall, the Rubin Museum of Art presents *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide*, an exhibition featuring a remarkable set of fifty-four paintings related to the Tibetan Buddhist deity Sarvavid Vairocana, or the All-knowing Buddha. The 18th-century album is one of only two known that illustrate, step-by-step, a complex visualization and ritual process that is typically restricted to oral instruction by teachers to initiated practitioners on a path to enlightenment. Believed to have been commissioned by a Mongolian patron during China’s Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the album’s Tibetan Buddhist content and Chinese aesthetic highlight the rich cross-cultural exchange that characterized the period and region. *The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide* is on view from October 3, 2014–April 13, 2015.

The exhibition marks the first U.S. presentation of the paintings, which were collected by a

European missionary in Inner Mongolia and brought to the West in 1923, now forming part of the collection of Belgium's Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp. The exhibition also presents significant new scholarship by curators Karl Debreczeny and Elena Pakhoutova who, through their research, reordered the album's sequence, reconstructed its artistic sources and historical context, as well as revealed each painting's complex ritual and visual content.

In addition to the fifty-four paintings, the exhibition includes sculptures and paintings of the All-knowing Buddha from the Rubin's collection, as well as from several other museums and private collections. Also on view will be a ritual table and ritual objects that are depicted in a number of the paintings, including a conch shell trumpet, hand drum, and skull cup.

The Paintings

Painted with pigments on paper, each of the album's fifty-four approximately 10 x 10 inch pages depicts specific steps in the complex meditation on the All-knowing Buddha, his qualities, activities, and the deities of his realm. An important figure in the Buddhist tradition, the All-knowing Buddha is described variously the personification of enlightenment and as a higher manifestation of Buddha Shakyamuni, the Buddha of our world and time.

Visualization is central to Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice, but it is rarely spelled out in a literal, visual fashion. The process of contemplation and visualization in Buddhist tantric meditation requires guidance, typically in the form of oral instruction by a teacher to an initiated disciple. This set of paintings—essentially a step-by-step ritual instruction manual in pictures—is therefore unorthodox, suggesting that it was made for someone raised outside of the Tibetan tradition, most likely a Mongolian prince who studied in the Inner Mongolian monastery where the paintings were found. The explicit visual and didactic nature of the album provides visitors with a unique opportunity to have a glimpse at the creative process of visualization that otherwise occurs only in the mind's eye.

Created in the format of album leaves, these paintings are likely to have been commissioned from a Chinese painting workshop under the guidance of a Tibetan Buddhist lama and, as a result, reflect an unusual and mixed visual and cultural language. The album's Tibetan Buddhist content is expressed in an overwhelmingly Chinese aesthetic that includes rich blue-green landscapes, native Chinese imagery such as Taoist Immortals, seafood, Chinese palatial architecture, and even a young Siddhartha depicted as Chinese—rather than Indian—prince. Minor variations among the leaves suggest that a number of artists were involved in their creation.

The complexity of the visualization and ritual processes centered on the All-knowing Buddha is evident throughout the album; the majority of the leaves illustrate multiple steps that must be performed correctly and in sequence in order to advance toward enlightenment. In one leaf, for instance, the practitioner first contemplates ultimate reality or emptiness (represented by a white moon disk), relying on several pictorial representations such as mantras, rainbow lights, and ritual implements, thus gradually imagining the All-Knowing Buddha. By training in these kinds of visualizations the meditator transforms his or herself by acquiring the qualities of this Buddha.

A projected animation at the start of the exhibition provides visitors with a sense of how an advanced practitioner would visualize the All-knowing Buddha and explain the imaginative practice of visualization in general. Beginning with a state of emptiness represented by the syllable “ah,” the projected imagery continues to build through sequential steps, eventually completing a figure of the All-knowing Buddha on a throne with a sunlit backdrop, the final result of this visualization process.

The Album in the West

The album was brought to Belgium by Father Rafael Verbois, who began a Catholic mission in Inner Mongolia in 1923. Father Verbois had great interest in Buddhism, researched many figures in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, and befriended abbots of the monasteries in the area. It was around this time that a young monk offered Verbois the fifty-four paintings, which had been pinned to the wall in the monk’s room in the monastery. In 1977, shortly before his death, Verbois gave the paintings to the Ethnographic Museum in Antwerp (later, Museum aan de Stroom). Research into the paintings began almost immediately and continued intermittently for a several years. So rare are the album’s contents that only after a number of years was the conclusion reached that the paintings dealt with the meditation on the All-knowing Buddha.

In 2012, exhibition curators Karl Debreczeny and Elena Pakhoutova began their own investigation into the album’s ritual, artistic, and historical elements. Their research and visual analysis led them to determine the likely sequence and each painting’s ritual and visual narratives. It also, in combination with research into local Inner Mongolian gazetteers, led them to the possible identity of the main patron of the painted set, the origins of the artists involved in its creation, and where it was produced. The exhibition presents their findings to the public for the first time and offers visitors the opportunity to follow the ritual and visual narrative from beginning to end in the new sequence, ultimately providing a better sense and appreciation for this rarely-explained spiritual practice.

Image credits (left to right):

Saravid Album Leaf 32, Inner Mongolia, 18th–19th c., pigments on paper, Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp, Belgium, AE.1977.0026.003; Saravid Album Leaf 24, Inner Mongolia, 18th–19th c., pigments on paper, Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp, Belgium, AE.1977.0026.036

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication with essays by Jan Van Alphen, the Rubin Museum’s Director of Exhibition, Collections and Research; Karl Debreczeny, Curator; Christian Luczanits, Senior Curator; and Elena Pakhoutova, Assistant Curator. The catalog is available at the Rubin Museum of Art Shop and distributed by the [University of Washington Press](#).

Karl Debreczeny

Dr. Debreczeny received masters degrees from Indiana University in both Art History and Tibetan Studies (1997) and earned a doctorate in Art History from the University of Chicago

(2007). His research focuses on exchanges between Tibetan and Chinese artistic traditions and his most recent publications include *The Black Hat Eccentric: Artistic Visions of the Tenth Karmapa* (2012). He has curated several exhibitions for the Rubin Museum of Art including, *Wutaishan: Pilgrimage to Five Peak Mountain*; *Patron and Painter: Situ Panchen and the Revival of the Encampment Style*; *Remember That You Will Die: Death Across Cultures*; and *Lama Patron Artist: The Great Situ Panchen* at the Smithsonian Freer-Sackler Gallery of Art, Washington DC. He joined the Rubin Museum as Curator in 2006.

Elena Pakhoutova

Dr. Pakhoutova is an Assistant Curator at the Rubin Museum of Art with a PhD in Asian Art History from the University of Virginia. Her background in Tibetan Buddhist studies contributed to her interdisciplinary approach to art history. Her research explores dialogue in visual traditions of Inner Asia, text and image, art and ritual, art and Buddhist pilgrimage, art production and patronage, and narrative in Tibetan visual culture. Her other interests include cross-cultural exchanges, material culture, and contemporary Tibetan art. At the Rubin Museum she has developed and curated *Once Upon Many Times: Legends and Myths in Himalayan Art*; and developed and co-curated *Gateway to Himalayan Art*; the *Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room from the Alice Kandell Collection*; and *Illuminated: The Art of Sacred Books*. Along with other museum curators she participated in the traveling cross-cultural exhibition *Pilgrimage and Faith*. Most recently at the Rubin Museum she curated the new installment of the *Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room* and *Count Your Blessings: the Art of Prayer Beads in Asia* and was the in-house curator for *Bodies in Balance: The Art of Tibetan Medicine*.

About The Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art's immersive environment stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of the Himalayas, India, and neighboring regions. Since its founding in 2004, the Rubin has welcomed more than 1.6 million visitors. Its outstanding collections of Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, Afghan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, Nepalese, and Pakistani art, which include photography, are complemented by a diverse array of films, on-stage conversations, concerts, and special events. The Museum's education, community, and access programming is dedicated to providing audiences of all ages and backgrounds with multidimensional experiences that foster dialogue and active engagement with the traditions and cultures of the Himalayas. The Rubin Museum's Café Serai and shop are also inspired by the region and serve as a natural extension of the gallery and programming experience.

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