

PRESS RELEASE

**The Rubin Museum partners with Nepal's
Keshchandra Mahavihara Conservation Society, Itumbaha, and
the Museology Program of Lumbini Buddhist University
to inaugurate the Itumbaha Museum in Kathmandu,
the first of its kind in Nepal.**

The Rubin contributed financial support and advised on collection management practices and interpretation, following the voluntary return of a 14th-century object to the monastery in January 2022

KATHMANDU, July 31, 2023 — On July 29, the Itumbaha monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, inaugurated the Itumbaha Museum, the first public galleries for the display of the monastery's extensive historic collection. Itumbaha (also translated as Itum Bahal) is a vihara, or monastery for Newar Buddhists, and is one of the oldest, largest, and most important Buddhist monasteries in Nepal. Its galleries will house a permanent display of 150 objects spanning over six centuries from the monastery's collection.

As the first dedicated display of art at any vihara (monastery) in the country, the new galleries at Itumbaha represent a significant development in the growing cultural heritage preservation and museum sector in Nepal.

In February 2022, the Rubin Museum of Art, the Keshchandra Mahavihara Conservation Society, Itumbaha, and Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha, a museology and Buddhist collections lecturer at Lumbini Buddhist University, formed a partnership to research, catalogue, and preserve over 500 objects in the monastery's collection.

The Rubin contributed principal funding as well as expertise on museum practices to help the Keshchandra Mahavihara Conservation Society realize this project. Kayastha and students in the museology and Buddhist collections master's degree program led the research, documentation, and curation of the collection display. In March 2023, Kayastha participated in a three-week professional development residency at the Rubin Museum in New York, serving to advance her museology practice and foster a network of learning.

This innovative partnership was established following the Rubin's voluntary return of an object from its collection to Itumbaha in January 2022: the lower part of a wooden, faux-window decoration showing a 14th-century Garland Bearing Apsara. Research confirmed that

the object had been originally situated at Itumbaha and was unlawfully removed from the site years before it entered the Rubin collection.

The Garland-Bearing Apsara will be reinstalled in its original location at Itumbaha – as of inauguration, it is displayed in a section of the galleries aimed to educate the public about the history of the monastery, including the impact of illicit art trafficking in Nepal. A 13th-century wooden Temple Strut with a Salabhinka, which the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, returned to Nepal in 2022, has already been reinstalled in its original location at Itumbaha.

Jorrit Britschgi, Executive Director of the Rubin Museum of Art, said: “The Rubin Museum strives to foster understanding and appreciation of Himalayan art globally—not just within the Museum’s walls. To that end, we are immensely proud to support and collaborate with a new generation of museum professionals from the Himalayan region and the efforts to share this important monastery’s cultural history more widely. We are committed to continuing to develop and strengthen our relationships in Nepal and throughout the Himalayan region, and creating opportunities for the meaningful exchange of knowledge, experience, and perspectives.”

Swosti Rajbhandari Kayastha, scholar of Nepalese art and culture, curator, and lecturer at Lumbini Buddhist University, said: “In the process of researching, conserving, and cataloguing the hundreds of works of art that have been used and housed at Itumbaha over the centuries, we have made many exciting discoveries that we are now proud to share with the public. I am incredibly grateful to the Keshchandra Mahavihara Conservation Society’s vision and trust in me and my students to guide this project, as well as the staff of the Rubin Museum, all of whom generously shared knowledge and advice along the way. Additionally, many thanks are owed to the design team and my students for their enthusiasm and dedication to advancing the cultural sector in Nepal.”

Pragya Ratna Shakya, President of the Keshchandra Mahavihara Conservation Society, Itumbaha, said: “This project has been in development for over ten years, and it is immensely gratifying to share our treasured history with both local and international visitors and preserve Itumbaha’s legacy for generations to come. We hope the museum at Itumbaha conservacan become a model for other organizations in the region to inspire new scholarship and engagement with Nepalese history and art.”

Objects on view at the Itumbaha Museum include numerous ritual objects, architectural elements, inscriptions, and sculptures. The objects are displayed across three galleries. Highlights of the collection include the crown of Keshchandra, the founder of Itumbaha, a golden door used for cultural practices and a striking blue painted terracotta urn carved in the shape of the face of Hatha Bhairava.

Itumbaha is recognized as the most significant monastery among the 28 viharas in Kathmandu. It is said to have been built by legendary figure Keshchandra, a son of a king of the Thakuri dynasty (ca. 600–ca. 1200) in the 11th century and retains its original layout. The large complex—located a short walking distance from Kathmandu Palace Square—is made up of several monasteries, courtyards, shrines, lanes, and many buildings and remains an active site for worship in the community. Notably, the galleries have opened just before the Gunla festival, taking place August 17 to September 17, 2023. Gunla is a holy month for Newar Buddhists for veneration, donations, and the display of sacred art.

RETURN OF OBJECTS FROM THE RUBIN

In January 2022, the Rubin Museum of Art and the Consulate General of Nepal in New York announced the transfer of ownership of two objects from the Rubin's permanent collection to Nepal: the Upper Section of a Frieze/Torana (17th century) and a Garland Bearing Apsara (14th century).

The Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign originally brought claims related to the two objects to the Museum's attention. In immediate response to the claims, the Rubin engaged two scholars of Nepalese art to further examine and research the known provenance of the pieces. The Museum also collaborated with the Consulate General of Nepal, New York, in determining the origin of the objects, the possibility of returning them to their original sites, and the repatriation process. After thorough investigation, all parties collectively determined that these objects were unlawfully removed from their original sites in Nepal.

The Garland Bearing Apsara is documented to have been originally situated at Itumbaha and went missing in spring of 1999. It resurfaced in the United States and was added to the Museum's collection in 2003.

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

The Rubin Museum of Art in Chelsea, New York City, explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, centered largely around art from the Tibetan Plateau, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of Himalayan art by interpreting and relating it to our shared human experience today. Inspired by the tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous religions, and aligned with ongoing research into learning, behavior, and the brain, the Rubin offers innovative exhibitions and programs that examine provocative ideas across the arts and explore the mind. Through this work, the Museum serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation, opening windows to inner worlds so visitors can better navigate outer ones. rubinmuseum.org

MEDIA CONTACTS

Sandrine Milet | Senior Manager, Communications & Marketing | 212-620-5000 x228
press@rubinmuseum.org

Darrell Rocha
Tel: +1 (347) 479-3919
drocha@brunswickgroup.com

Julia Guiheen
Tel: +1 (646) 266-9272
jguiheen@brunswickgroup.com