

PRESS RELEASE

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART UNVEILS GEMS SAID TO HAVE BEEN IN
CLOSE PROXIMITY TO ASHES OF THE BUDDHA


Opening May 31, 2019, “Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa” showcases power objects from the Piprahwa stupa in northern India, on view for the first time in the United States




The Gems from the Stupa, Box B; Piprahwa, India; discovered and encased January 1898; various gemstones; box dims.: 20 x 15 x 2 cm; photograph by Charlotte MacMillan; courtesy of Chris, Luke, and Daniel Peppé

The Gems from the Stupa, Box A; Piprahwa, India; discovered and encased January 1898; gold leaf ornaments; box dims.: 20 x 15 x 2 cm; photograph by Charlotte MacMillan; courtesy of Chris, Luke & Daniel Peppé

Sharelines:

 On May 31, @RubinMuseum will present “Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa,” showcasing objects imbued with the power of the Buddha’s remains. <http://therubin.org/2v2>

 Amazing gems and gold ornaments were enshrined for over two thousand years with the Buddha’s remains in northern India. On May 31, @RubinMuseum will unveil them for the first time in the U.S. <http://therubin.org/2v2>

New York, NY, May 17, 2019 — The Rubin Museum is pleased to exhibit powerful gems and gold-leaf ornaments discovered in an ancient stupa in Piprahwa, northern India, believed to have been enshrined with a portion of the Buddha’s cremated remains. These lavish offerings of various gems and gold-leaf ornaments were deposited with the reliquaries to be discovered centuries later. The Rubin Museum is honored to host these gems for the first time in the United States, from May 31, 2019,

through June 8, 2020, in the special installation “Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa,” which tells the story of the stupa’s amazing discovery.

The story of their unearthing begins in the late nineteenth century, at an excavation of a site in northern India where William Claxton Peppé discovered an ancient stupa containing a large stone chest with gems, gold-foil ornaments, and five intact reliquaries, one of which had an inscription indicating it held the remains of the Buddha. The discovery and the inscription caused a sensation as it was the first time that substantial, important items could be linked directly to the historical Buddha.

According to Buddhist traditions, after the Buddha’s passing and cremation, his relics were distributed among the eight rulers of the kingdoms where the Buddha preached. Stupas containing these relics are sites of pilgrimage and are elaborately decorated and continuously enlarged, making them some of the most important, powerful places in the Buddhist world.

Imbued with the Buddha’s blessings from being in close proximity to his corporeal remains, these objects are known as “contact relics” and are believed to possess an enormous amount of power. Traditional Buddhists believe that the objects’ proximity with the Buddha’s remains imbued them with the power to increase the merit of those who see and approach them.

Visitors will have the remarkable opportunity to experience the power of these exquisite offerings to the Buddha and accumulate merit by viewing them. “This is a unique occasion to come up close and personal with objects that are, as Buddhists believe, literally imbued with the power of the Buddha’s blessings. They’ve been enshrined within the stupa for over two thousand years and are thought to bestow a tremendous amount of merit,” says Elena Pakhoutova, Curator of Himalayan Art at the Rubin Museum of Art. “What is also interesting is that subsequent excavations in the 1970s revealed more reliquaries and a large monastic site associated with the capital of Shakyas, the ancient clan the Buddha is said to be from. This is one of the eight sites where his relics were deposited, with extensive offerings, for veneration. We are glad that the Peppé family thought of our Museum as the venue to show these amazing objects in the United States for the first time.”

Throughout 2019, the Rubin Museum’s exhibitions and programs focus on how we can activate the power that exists within and between us. “Charged with Buddha’s Blessings,” along with power objects displayed across two exhibition floors, invites visitors to consider how objects can function as sources of power. The power of the gems — and the merit accumulated by those who see and approach them — align with the Rubin’s yearlong focus on the theme of power and exploration of how power is conferred.

The Rubin Museum will draw on “Charged with Buddha’s Blessings” in many of its Himalayan Heritage programs, which meet the first Wednesday of every month. Kicking off on June 5, the Venerable Bhakha Tulku Rinpoche will join Rubin Museum educator Tashi Chodron to celebrate Saga Dawa, the holiest month in the Tibetan Buddhist calendar, commemorating Shakyamuni Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana (final nirvana).

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“Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa” is supported by Tulku Tsultrim Pelgyi.

“Charged with Buddha’s Blessings: Relics from an Ancient Stupa” is curated by Elena Pakhoutova, Curator of Himalayan Art.

About the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art is an arts oasis and cultural hub in New York City’s vibrant Chelsea neighborhood that inspires visitors to make powerful connections between contemporary life and the art and ideas of the Himalayas, India, and neighboring regions. With a diverse array of thought-provoking exhibitions and programs—including films, concerts, and on-stage conversations—the Rubin provides immersive experiences that encourage personal discoveries and spark new ways of seeing the world. Emphasizing cross-cultural connections, the Rubin is a space to contemplate the big questions that extend across history and span human cultures.

About Elena Pakhoutova

Elena Pakhoutova is Curator of Himalayan Art at the Rubin Museum of Art with a PhD in Asian Art History from the University of Virginia. Her background in Tibetan Buddhist studies contributes to her interdisciplinary approach to art history. Her research explores dialogues in the visual traditions of Inner Asia, art and ritual, art production and patronage, text and image, and narrative in Tibetan visual culture. Her other interests include cross-cultural exchange, material culture, and contemporary Tibetan art. At the Rubin Museum, she has curated several exhibitions, including “Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies,” “Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual,” “The All-Knowing Buddha: A Secret Guide” (co-curated with Karl Debreczeny), “The Second Buddha: Master of Time,” and most recently “The Power of Intention: Reinventing the (Prayer) Wheel.”

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