

Taking Refuge: Buddhist Art from the Land of White Clouds

February 25 through May 3, 2009



Unknown artist, Tibet: *Nagaraja*, 15th century; gilt bronze; on long-term loan from a private collection.

Exhibition presents Buddhist art from the Himalayan region, spanning centuries and countries

Berkeley, CA, February 13, 2009 — The University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) presents **Taking Refuge: Buddhist Art from the Land of White Clouds**, an exhibition of extremely rare and beautiful art from the Himalayan region—sometimes referred to as the Land of White Clouds—which has served as a lasting home to Buddhism. The exhibition, which is curated by Senior Curator for Asian Art Julia M. White, contains over thirty important and beautiful objects from Tibet, Nepal, Kashmir, and India. **Taking Refuge: Buddhist Art from the Land of White Clouds** opens February 25 and runs through May 3, 2009.

In addition to acknowledging references to the Himalayan region as “the Land of White Clouds,” the exhibition takes its name from a prayer common to all Buddhists: “I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the Dharma. I take refuge in the Sangha.” This simple prayer contains the essence of the Buddhist canon, referring to the three components of practice that constitute an active devotional life. Depictions of the Buddha, the Dharma (doctrine), and the Sangha (community) aid the believer in understanding, learning, and participating in Buddhist practice.

A gilt bronze standing image of Buddha from western Tibet, created by Kashmiri craftsmen in the tenth or eleventh century, is one of the finest examples from an important transitional phase in Himalayan Buddhism. The Buddha is depicted in a highly symmetrical stance, draped in a tightly fitted robe, his legs planted firmly upon a lotus base. His right hand is raised in *abhaya mudra*, or fear abiding gesture, while his left hand grasps the edge of his robe. The face of the Buddha is delicately articulated with arched brow and gentle expression. His long earlobes point to the Buddha’s previous life as an Indian prince who has since renounced his life of privilege, including the jewels he once wore.

The importance of teachers in the Buddhist tradition cannot be overstated, as the transmission of the Dharma requires a direct and personal relationship with a teacher. Great lamas are honored in many ways, through depiction in paintings and sculpture or in monuments large and small. A bronze stupa in the exhibition demonstrates this tradition, honoring through inscribed verse an important sixteenth-century lama. The stupa once contained the relics of the teacher but now only bears his name. Other items that formally teach the Dharma include paintings depicting important principles like those expressed in the Bardo (Tibetan Book of the Dead). A colorful example can be seen in a pair of eighteenth-century paintings depicting both wrathful and peaceful deities from the Bardo.

Vajrayana Buddhism is the primary teaching in Tibet and the Himalayas, and has absorbed many doctrines that the lamas share with a larger community known as the Sangha. The esoteric doctrine that is passed from the master *rimpoche* to the disciple relies very heavily on oral transmission accompanied by visual aids such as mandalas, thangkas, and sculptural representations of members of the community. An elegant ninth- or tenth-century gilt bronze Padmapani (an aspect of Avalokitesvara, bodhisattva of compassion) communicates the nature of an important deity, while more earthly qualities are expressed in a sixteenth-century gilt bronze image of the teacher Mahasiddha Avadhutipa.

The vast array of images of deities, teachers, protectors, and saints, all of whom receive attention by the devout Buddhist, are understood to be tools in the process of understanding the teachings of the Buddha. Although they are honored, placed on altars and pedestals, and given great respect, the images the practitioner knows have no value in and of themselves.

Public Programs

Curator's Talk – Julia White

Wednesday, March 4, 12:15 p.m.

BAM Galleries

Taking Refuge Curator Julia White offers an informal walkthrough of the exhibition.

Film Series

Thinking About Not Thinking: Buddhism, Meditation, and Film

Screenings with Lectures by Robert Sharf

Mondays, March 2–April 27, 3 p.m.

PFA Theater

This film-lecture course uses film to understand Buddhism, and Buddhist principles to reflect on film.

In the Museum Store

Buddhist Art and Architecture, by Robert Fisher. \$18.95, paperback.

Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols, by Robert Beer. \$27.95, paperback

Support

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About BAM/PFA

The UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) aims to inspire the imagination and ignite critical dialogue through contemporary and historical art and film, engaging audiences from the campus, Bay Area community, and beyond. BAM/PFA is one of the largest university art museums in the United States in both size and attendance, presenting fifteen art exhibitions and five hundred film programs each year. The museum's collection of more than 15,000 works includes exceptional examples of mid-twentieth-century painting, including important works by Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock, Eva Hesse, and Mark Rothko, as well as historical and contemporary Asian art, early American painting, Conceptual and contemporary international art, and California and Bay Area art. The PFA film and video collection now includes the largest group of Japanese films outside of Japan, as well as impressive holdings of Soviet silents, West Coast avant-garde cinema, seminal video art, rare animation, Central Asian productions, Eastern European cinema, and international classics.

Museum Information

Location: 2626 Bancroft Way, just below College Avenue near the UC Berkeley campus.

Gallery and Museum Store Hours: Wednesday to Sunday, 11 to 5. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

Admission: General admission is \$8; admission for seniors, disabled persons, non-UC Berkeley students, and young adults (13 – 17) is \$5; admission for BAM/PFA members, UC Berkeley students, staff and faculty, and children under 12 is free; admission for group tours is \$3 per person (to arrange a group tour, call [510] 642-5188). Admission is free on the first Thursday of each month.

Information: 24-hour recorded message (510) 642-0808; fax (510) 642-4889; TDD (510) 642-8734.

Website: bampfa.berkeley.edu