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ART

Aesthetic Himalayas

Stunning Washington D. C. exhibition showcases exquisite Buddhist and Hindu art from Nepal, Tibet and Kashmir

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Many years ago, when I was in the middle of my master's degree in Art History, I was doing research in the archives of the Carnegie Institute Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was interested then in Japanese prints, but in the underground climate-controlled storage of Pittsburgh's most major museum I came upon my first Tibetan thangka, a traditional hanging scroll painting. It was a depiction of the ferocious Mahakala, the Buddhist (and Hindu) God who guards the wheel of time. I asked the then curator of Asian arts what it was, and he replied, "Oh, that's a primitive fantasy of debased northern Buddhism from the wild parts of the Himalayas. Don't take it seriously." A couple of years later when I joined my husband in his Himalayan Kingdom Art Gallery venture, I was to learn to take the art of Himalayan Asia very seriously, indeed.

When, in the 1960's, art historian Dr. Pratapaditya Pal decided to specialize in the art of the Himalayan regions, he faced the problems of an uneducated general public, and more shockingly, an uneducated intellectual community, which did not consider the arts of Kashmir, Nepal and Tibet to be "high art." That evaluation has all changed with "Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure, " organized by the Art Institute of Chicago. I went to see it on display at the Smithsonian Institute's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. It features 163 Buddhist, Hindu and Bon paintings and sculpture created between the 7th and 19th century.

Works on view were created in an astonishingly large variety of media, scale and

color, ranging from a tiny, rare and exquisite ivory of the fasting Buddha to a life-size portrait of a Nepalese king as a multi-armed, cosmic Deity. Other objects on view include intricately detailed manuscript illuminations on palm leaf, paper and wood, and brightly colored thangkas (cloth paintings) depicting mandalas, Deities and teachers. Stunning stone, wood and bronze images of Deities, many embellished with gemstones, gilding and paint, are included. The melding of Hindu Gods and Buddhist theology and artistic methods produces some astounding images, such as that of Lord Ganesha (page 31), from Tibet.

Sackler's assistant curator, Dr. Debra Diamond, noted, "This is Dr. Pal's answer to those who did not consider the focus of his work to be significant in the past. This is Dr. Pal's triumphant response that unequivocally validates his faith in the monumental contribution of the art traditions of the Himalayas."

Born in Bangladesh, Dr. Pal grew up in Calcutta. He did his doctorate in fine arts and history at the University of Calcutta and wrote his PhD, with special focus on Nepal, under the guidance of historian Nihar Ranjan Roy. In 1962 he received the Commonwealth Scholarship of Cambridge and got his second PhD. And in 1967, he moved to the United States. Currently, Dr. Pal is visiting curator of Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, curator emeritus of the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, California, and the author of over 50 books on South Asian art.

One reason for the misunderstanding of Himalayan art is exemplified in the case of Nepalese Hinduism and Buddhism, wherein the Deities of each faith are often shared. A Nepalese Hindu of the Newari caste will customarily worship both Hindu and Buddhist Deities, yet the juxtaposition of Hindu and Buddhist elements has often been misinterpreted by outsiders to mean that the Newar does not know what he or she is doing. It has been suggested that the Himalayan regions are far from the centers of culture and thus provincial. Furthermore, the ferocity of some of the Deities of Himalayan Buddhism--such as Lhamo, the guardian Mother Goddess of Tibet and the Inner Yamadharma Raja, the dispeller of ignorance--has been off-putting to foreign eyes because viewers do not know the serious philosophy behind the ferocious images.

The Sackler Gallery worked to educate its public on Himalayan art through a series of wonderful programs and lectures during the exhibition. Dr. Pal himself spoke at the October opening (the exhibit closed January, 2004). A film series, concerts of

Himalayan music and chanting, demonstrations of the techniques of Himalayan art, dance presentations, a lecture by Dr. Robert Thurman, professor of Religion at Columbia University, and a gala concert by Phillip Glass informed the public in broad ways about the application of the arts of the Himalayas. Dr. Diamond, also a specialist in Rajput painting, is an art historian whose insight and enthusiasm are infectious. She was daily on site in the gallery to watch over the exhibition and to inform and guide the docent staff as they make the close educational connections between the exhibition and the visiting public.

Dr. Diamond was assisted by Mr. Stephen Truax Eckerd, the Coordinator of the ImaginAsia program. Mr. Eckerd was for many years a Peace Corps trainer in Kathmandu, Nepal, and there he established the connections with local artists and artisans that allowed him to create a hands-on program for children. In a beautifully appointed room near the gallery entrance, Mr. Eckerd has assembled Nepalese marionettes in the images of the Gods of Hinduism. Many of the puppets have two or four faces so they can be spun around immediately to create another Deity on the stage. Ink and prayer flag woodblocks and an authentic Tibetan Buddhist reading table and altar commissioned specifically for the ImaginAsia room provide the accessibility for children to touch and explore. "The Saturday programs are splendid," Dr. Diamond comments, "Children make masks and put on dance costumes, and we thus have small Tibetan Deities dancing through the exhibition randomly throughout the day. The spirit and the energy are great." Mr. Eckerd is the author of a children's workbook and gallery companion called *Himalayas: Where the Gods Make Music and Dance*. One page reads, "Exaltation of Siva and Life of Buddha: & On a low table behind Indra, find the long, narrow, wooden book covers that illustrate in brilliant color the musician and dance depicted on this page. These book covers are over nine hundred years old and once held fragile pages cut from palm leaves. You know, this book once contained stories about Siva and his sons, Ganesha and Kumara. What are Kumara's goat- and rooster-headed friends doing?" Then the child participant peers closely, answers this little question and moves on, absorbed in this gentle learning activity.

Bhim Dahal is a traditional dancer and musician of Kathmandu. He is currently living in Washington, D. C. as an artist in residence. Mr. Dahal, graceful and serene, was in the museum daily to teach children how to play the madal, a double-sided drum struck with a curved baton; the damaru, a smaller double-sided drum that is usually associated with Siva; and the Nepalese sarangi, which is played like an upright violin.

Five days a week Mr. Dahal performs the dance of Manjusri in costume and

headdress on a great lotus mandala on the floor outside the entrance to the gallery. His dance describes and evokes Manjusri, one of the great God patrons of the Kathmandu Valley. It is Manjusri who cut a cleft in the rim of the valley allowing the waters of a high altitude lake to run out, thus making the valley habitable--a story accurately reflecting the geologic history of the valley which dates the draining at 10,000 years ago. "When I dance as Manjusri, I am both outside Manjusri worshiping him, but also I am being Manjusri myself, both at the same time, " Mr. Dahal explains to his audience assembled at the outer circle of the lotus.

Three great Bodhisattvas of gilt bronze, each at least three feet tall, greet visitors at the entrance to the galleries. They are ambassadors from each of the regions the exhibition addresses: Nepal, Tibet and Kashmir. The exhibition features several pilgrimage paintings which depict an abbreviated road map of the route and details along the way to a sacred destination. These types of paintings are made for those who, perhaps for reasons of health or age, cannot make the pilgrimage. By following the painting visually, some of the merit of actually making the route is transmitted. "Pilgrimage to Gosainkund, " for example, is a late 18th-century painting that shows villages and temples on the way to this tirtha, a sacred lake to Lord Siva, located at 16,000 feet. In affectionate detail, the artist has made the route holy by depicting myths and miracles specific to each area along the trail.

The collections that museums offer to the public richly contribute to everyone's sense of being both a national as well as a world citizen. The more we all learn, the less we will ever be willing to dismiss a major art or history tradition simply because we know nothing about it. We are greatly indebted to people like Dr. Pal, Dr. Diamond, Mr. Singh, Mr. Eckerd and Mr. Dahal for their progressive and enriching work and to the unnamed artists themselves.