

# UNIVERSITY FACULTY RESOURCE

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## *GATEWAY TO HIMALAYAN ART*



**RUBIN  
MUSEUM  
OF ART**

[RMAnc.org](http://RMAnc.org)

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## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The discussion questions, responses, and resources that follow are intended to enhance your experience of the exhibition, *Gateway to Himalayan Art*. The exhibition provides an introduction to the art and sacred traditions of the Himalayan region, and is divided into five thematic sections: The Map; Figures and Symbols; Materials and Techniques; Purpose and Function; and the Tibetan Shrine Room. These sections provide opportunities for you and your students to explore the geography, principal figures, materials, and ritual function of Himalayan art.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### 1. The Map

The Himalayan region covers a vast swath of territory over 1600 miles long. Home to the highest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest, this region has experienced tremendous shifts of population, political allegiances and boundaries over the millennia. As information and ideas passed along trade routes, cultures of stunning diversity and complexity developed.

**Discussion question:** How might the geographical information provided on the map help to explain the cultural diversity and complexity of the Himalayan region?

**Discussion response:** The towering peaks of the Himalayan mountain range and Tibetan Plateau have thwarted political and economic cohesion in the region but also have created rich pockets of cultural diversity.

## SECTION 1: FIGURES AND SYMBOLS

This section identifies the key figures and symbols in Himalayan sacred traditions, in particular, Buddhism, a 2500 year-old belief system that developed in northern India.



**The Buddha Shakyamuni**  
1200 - 1299  
Tibet  
Buddhist Lineage  
Metal, Gilt Copper Alloy with Pigment  
Collection of Rubin Museum of Art  
(HAR 65454)

### Buddhas

The term buddha, meaning “awakened” or “enlightened,” was first used to refer to Shakyamuni, who lived some time between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE in northern India and whose teachings became the foundation of Buddhism. Shakyamuni became the Buddha by achieving enlightenment, or a complete understanding of the true nature of reality, which freed him from the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Over time “buddha” came to refer to not only one person but all manifestations of enlightenment. Buddhas are said to possess distinct marks that are often shown in their representations, most notably a cranial protuberance (ushnisha), a tuft of hair between the eyebrows (urna), and long earlobes, and they are usually shown wearing the robes of a monk.

**Discussion question:** The Buddha Shakyamuni is traditionally depicted with distinctive physical features and gestures that tell the story of his spiritual awakening (enlightenment). Can you identify them?

### Discussion Response:

- **Earth-touching mudra:** When the Buddha attained a spiritual awakening, he touched the earth to witness it. This mudra (gesture) represents the moment when Siddhartha Gautama, who was once a Hindu prince, became the Buddha.
- **Ushnisha:** According to tradition, when the Buddha became enlightened, a cranial protuberance grew at the top of his head because the size of his brain increased.
- **Urna:** The tuft of hair between the eyebrows illustrates radiant wisdom.
- **Long earlobes:** When Siddhartha was a young Hindu prince, he wore heavy earrings that stretched his earlobes.



## **Bodhisattvas and Tantric Deities**

### **Bodhisattvas**

Bodhisattvas are beings who aspire to attain the awakened state of a Buddha and help others to achieve this state as well. Peaceful and compassionate, they take a vow to end all suffering. Bodhisattvas can be male or female and usually wear crowns, jewelry, and fine garments of Indian royalty. When bodhisattvas assume a female form, they are often referred to as female deities.



**Green Tara**  
**Tibet**  
**1700 - 1799**  
**Uncertain Lineage**  
**114.30x76.20cm (45x30in)**  
**Ground Mineral Pigment, Raised Gold on Cotton**  
**Collection of Rubin Museum of Art**  
**HAR 9672**

The large central figure in this painting represents Green Tara. Tara is one of the most beloved deities in Himalayan and Central Asian Buddhist traditions. Known as the “savioress,” she protects travelers from danger and provides comfort from fear. In this painting, Tara sits on a lotus petal throne and is surrounded by lush flowers and plants. In Buddhist iconography, green is the color of growth, vitality, and movement.

*Comparative discussion questions to follow on page 7.*



## Tantric or Wrathful Deities

Tantra is an ancient Indian spiritual system of ritual practices that was incorporated into Tibetan Buddhism. In Tantric Buddhist tradition there exist wrathful deities who appear frightening and demonic but are, in fact, powerful helpers and protectors who assist the practitioner to transform into a Buddha. Tantric deities—the indispensable subjects of Himalayan art—are the focus of esoteric religious practices (tantras) that aim to radically transform conventional understandings of reality. Tantric deities and practices are as diverse as people’s needs and capacities. Female and male deities in embrace represent the unity of wisdom (understanding of reality) and method (compassionate action), two aspects of the enlightened mind. Tantric deities can have multiple heads, arms, and legs, symbolizing their many abilities.



**Shri Devi, Dorje Rabtenma**

**Tibet**

**1600 - 1699**

**Nyingma and Sakya Lineages**

**88.90x63.50cm (35x25in)**

**Ground Mineral Pigment, Fine Gold Line, Black Background on Cotton**

**Collection of Rubin Museum of Art**

**HAR 330**

The central figure in this painting is Shri Devi, a wrathful female protector of Tibet. Astride a horse, she is colored black, clutches a sword, and is surrounded by flames. In Buddhist iconography, black symbolizes a fierce, unrelenting determination to accomplish all goals.

**Discussion question:** Looking at the two paintings of Green Tara and Shri Devi, how might an observer distinguish a bodhisattva from a tantric wrathful deity? Describe differences and similarities between the two paintings.

**Discussion response:** The plants surrounding Tara, as well as the flowers she holds and her gentle expression, evoke a sense of calm and ease, whereas the flames, smoke, and blackness surrounding Shri Devi create a sense of mystery and power.



## SECTION 2: MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

This section addresses the materials and techniques representing the diverse range of Himalayan sacred art found at the Rubin Museum.

### Display Case: Hollow Metal Casting of Tara

One method for making religious sculpture in the Himalayas is through a technique called hollow metal casting, a method that thrives in the Himalayas today. This large display case shows how Nepalese artisans have constructed a bronze sculpture of Green Tara in multiple stages.



**Discussion question:** After examining the first four steps in the case, focus your attention on the Tara in step 5. What differences do you see between the left and right side of Tara?

**Discussion response:** When the metal sculpture is first removed from the clay mold, the surface is rough. The qualities that give Tara her beauty and vitality, the inlaid jewels, and polished surface of her body, are made during a process called cold chisling.

### SECTION 3: PURPOSE AND FUNCTION

This section addresses the purpose and function of ritual objects and acts often used and depicted in Himalayan works of art found throughout the museum.

**Display Case: Vajra and Bell, Bhutan circa 20<sup>th</sup> century, Metal Alloy and Ash Wood.**

Although Himalayan art is often appreciated for its aesthetic beauty and fine craftsmanship, the objects in this case are used primarily for ritual practice. The vajra represents skillful method, and the bell signifies wisdom.



**Discussion question:** Why might a practitioner hold both of these objects in each hand during a Buddhist ritual?

**Discussion response:** When the vajra and the bell are held together, they symbolize the union of skillful method (vajra) and wisdom (bell) within the body and mind of the practitioner.

## Lama Performing a Long-Life Ritual

There is a dynamic play of color in this thangka. In Buddhist iconography, red symbolizes passion. Green, as mentioned earlier, symbolizes movement and energy.



### Lama Performing a Long-Life Ritual

Tibet

1800 - 1899

Nyingma Lineage

74.30x50.17cm (29.25x19.75in)

Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton

Collection of Rubin Museum of Art

HAR 869

**Discussion question:** When depicting sacred rituals, color plays an important role in Tibetan paintings to engage the eye and mind of the viewer. Red and green are complementary colors. When placed near each other, they evoke a sense of visual dynamism. Looking at the colors in this thangka, how are red and green used to move your eye around the painting to create a feeling of vitality?

### Discussion response:

- Our gaze is drawn to the Lama wearing a red robe with a large green halo behind his head, and figures floating in the sky surrounded by red and green halos
- Red and green rainbow ribbon-like shapes pull our eye to the sky



## Tara, Mother of All Activities

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Tara, Mother of All Activities  
1200 – 1299  
Tibet  
Buddhist Lineage  
46.50cm (18.31in) high  
Metal, Silver Inlay  
Stone Inset: Coral, Turquoise  
Collection of Rubin Museum of Art  
HAR 65453

**Discussion question:** This Tibetan sculpture of Tara was made eight-hundred years ago, whereas the Nepalese Tara, in the Materials and Techniques section, was made recently. The similarities and differences between the two pieces illustrate both thematic connections and aesthetic diversity of art across Himalayan cultures. What are some of the similarities and differences?

**Discussion response:**

**Similarities:** The poses of the two Taras are the same. In both examples, she extends her right foot and right hand to offer help to all those in need, and she holds flowers in her hands.

**Differences:** The bodies and facial features of the two Taras are quite different. The Tibetan Tara has a round face, wide eyes, and full-formed body. The Nepalese Tara, in contrast, has a thinner face, a longer, beak-like nose (a stylistic convention of Nepalese artisans), and a more slender body.



## Wheel of Existence

In the Himalayan region, the Wheel of Existence is a popular teaching tool for explaining the cyclic process of life, death, and rebirth (samsara). According to Buddhists, the message of the Wheel of Existence is that the life cycle is repeated over the course of many lifetimes until a practitioner becomes spiritually awakened, providing an escape from these cycles.



**Wheel of Existence**  
**Tibet**  
**1800 - 1899**  
**Buddhist Lineage**  
**Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton**  
**Collection of Rubin Museum of Art**  
**HAR 65356**

The six realms below represent the six karmic existences: (1) Hell Realm (violence); (2) Hungry Ghosts (greed); (3) Animals (ignorance); (4) Gods (pride); (5) Demigods (jealousy); (6) Humans (selfishness).



**Discussion question:** Each quadrant of the Wheel of Existence shows a realm where a person might be reborn. Looking at the bottom quadrant, the Hell Realm, how does this realm illustrate the idea of retribution and punishment?

**Discussion response:** The scenes of people enduring painful tortures in the Hell Realm illustrate the effects of karma: those who commit evil and cruel deeds in the present lifetime will be punished by being reborn in the Hell Realm in the next life time.

**Discussion question:** Looking at the animals at the center of the wheel, why might a pig, a snake, and a rooster be the focus of an object reflecting the cycle of life?

**Discussion response:** These three animals represent obstacles on the path to enlightenment; the pig symbolizes ignorance, the snake anger, and the rooster desire.



## SECTION 4: THE TIBETAN SHRINE ROOM

### The Alice S. Kandell Collection

This section of the exhibition presents religious art in context. The installation features religious artifacts as they would be displayed in the domestic shrine of a wealthy Tibetan Buddhist. The objects are from the collection of Alice Kandell, who designed a shrine room in her New York City apartment to closely resemble Tibetan Buddhist shrines she encountered in her travels. All of the objects—scroll paintings as well as sculptures of buddhas, bodhisattavas, tantric deities, female deities, wrathful deities and teachers—have been arranged on traditional Tibetan furniture and according to the hierarchy they assume in Tibetan Buddhist practices.



**Discussion question:** On the central altar there is a sculpture made of silver, about two feet high. Who does it represent? Why would this figure have been placed in the middle of the altar?

**Discussion response:** This sculpture represents Buddha Shakyamuni in the earth-touching mudra, as seen in the earlier sculpture of the Buddha. Unlike the other sculptures in the shrine, this one was made from silver repoussé (hammered metal) and still retains its handsome base and beautiful flower mandorla background behind the Buddha (for more information, refer to *A Shrine for Tibet*, p. 71).

## Resources for Further Learning

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### *Web Resources*

[www.rmanyc.org/gateway](http://www.rmanyc.org/gateway)

**Gateway to Himalayan Art**//Explore exhibition resources to further discover the principal concepts of Himalayan art through interactive multi-media and didactic materials.

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[www.rmanyc.org](http://www.rmanyc.org)

**The Rubin Museum of Art**//Explore Multimedia resources and videos to find out about present and upcoming exhibition and programs at the Rubin Museum of Art.

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[www.exploreart.org](http://www.exploreart.org)

**Explore Art**// Journey behind works of Himalayan art on this interactive site, revealing the stories, ideas and beliefs that inspired them. The site also lets visitors consider how peoples of other culture have expressed ideas on similar issues through their own artistic traditions.

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[www.himalayanart.org](http://www.himalayanart.org)

**Himalayan Art Resources**//Search a virtual museum of documented Himalayan art that includes high-resolution images, essays, articles, thematic collections, bibliographies, and activities for children.

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[www.tibetanlineages.org](http://www.tibetanlineages.org)

**Treasury of Lives: Biographies of Himalayan Buddhist Masters**//Browse biographies and portraits of Tibetan Buddhist and Bon masters by religious tradition, geography, community, and historic period.

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### *Recommended Reading*

Beer, R. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Boston: Shambhala, 2003.

Eck, D. *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Eliade, M. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Jackson, D. & J. Jackson. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2006.

Laird, T. *The Story of Tibet: Conversations with the Dalai Lama*. New York: Grove Press, 2006.

Leidy, D. P. "The Buddha Image: 2nd to 7th Century," *The Art of Buddhism: An Introduction to its Meaning and History*. Boston: Shambhala, 2008: 31-55.

Lopez, D.S. Editor. *Buddhism in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.

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Rhie, M. & R. Thurman. *A Shrine for Tibet: The Alice S. Kandell Collection*. New York: Tibet House US, 2009.

Strong, J.S. *The Experience of Buddhism*. Belmont, C.A.: Wadsworth, 1995.

Trungpa, C. *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*. Boston: Shambhala, 2002.