

Press Release

Bhutan – Sacred art from the Himalaya

4 July – 17 October 2010

In the small kingdom of Bhutan, situated at the edge of the Himalaya, religion is firmly anchored in everyday life. Nowhere else in the world is the tantric form of Buddhism still as strong and vibrant. Art and culture, music and dance are entirely permeated by the Buddhist tradition. On their journey, the sacred Buddhist artworks in the exhibition at the Museum Rietberg are attended by two Bhutanese monks. They will perform ceremonies of worship and cleansing daily in the exhibition galleries, so as to exorcise negative energies and enhance the works' spiritual aura.

For the first time in the West, an exhibition displays more than 100 religious artefacts from Bhutan's temples and monasteries. The show was organised by the Honolulu Academy of Arts in conjunction with the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan. It is the result of close collaboration among western curators and local scholars, monks, high-ranking clergy and representatives of Bhutanese cultural institutions, who during the five years it took to prepare the exhibition toured the country together, examined countless treasures, discussed their iconography and quality from the various perspectives of the participants, and drew up the final list of objects for this show. Finally, on a day chosen for its auspiciousness, the sacred artefacts were given a ritual farewell and sent on their way to Honolulu, San Francisco, New York, Paris and Cologne. Having met with enormous interest at all of its stations, the exhibition has now reached Zurich on the final leg of its journey.

The history of Bhutan is inextricably intertwined with Buddhism. This small country, roughly the same size as Switzerland, consists of several deep mountain valleys used in antiquity by merchants travelling between the Himalayas and India. Once Buddhism was introduced to the region in the eighth century, Tibetan monks began arriving in waves, and the monasteries they founded developed into centres of culture and power. In the 16th century one such immigrant, the monk Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, united the valleys into a single nation and greatly contributed to the cultural identity of Bhutan. He created a system of administration, based on the principles of Buddhism that divided

power between the head of the monastic community and the political ruler. The charismatic leader's death was followed by a power struggle, which grew ever more intense until in 1907 the strongest and most capable local ruler was chosen as king. Thus, for the first time in its history, Bhutan became a hereditary monarchy. Two years ago, however, the great-grandson of the first king voluntarily relinquished his throne and established a democratically elected parliament.

In the modern world, Bhutan strives to preserve its traditions and foster awareness of its cultural riches, and enjoys international respect for its promotion of “gross national happiness” – which depends upon an intact natural, cultural and social environment – rather than a merely material gross national product.

Bhutan's cultural heritage is omnipresent, with over 2,000 monasteries and temples dotting the landscape, mighty fortified monasteries dominating strategic positions, and little sites of sacred importance at every turn. For their part, temples are home to countless art treasures. These paintings and statues are not primarily considered works of art, but rather objects of veneration in ritual use to this day. Indeed, many of them are rarely seen in Bhutan, since they are only displayed for worship during particular ceremonies.

The wonderfully expressive artefacts afford scholars and amateurs alike a glimpse of the intricate precepts of tantric Buddhism. Images of the Buddha deep in contemplation radiate utter calm and offer a taste of complete detachment, while the graceful likenesses of the bodhisattvas render palpable their compassionate devotion to the cause of liberating all living beings from the cycle of suffering. Fascinating representations of wrathful deities with faces distorted by rage, distinguished by their gruesome attributes, are elements of a polysemous sign system intended to illustrate various teachings. Didactical images comprising a multitude of little scenes recount the lives and the spiritual path of great masters, while striking portraits up to three-and-a-half metres tall commemorate the legacy of wise teachers.

All of these pictures, some comprising a sequence of stories and episodes featuring a broad cast of characters, are distinguished by their abundance of detail. They are generally set in an idyllic sylvan landscape of flowers, brooks and animals, and often repay close attention to the elaborate jewels and elegant garb of the characters depicted.

In addition to sculptures and paintings, the exhibition's filmic offerings provide an introduction to yet another Bhutanese art form: the ritual Cham dances, performed during major temple festivals when visitors stream in from far and wide. These mask dances serve both as religious instruction for the faithful and as a meditative practice for the monks performing them, who merge spiritually with the deity they are depicting.

Cham dances

These ritual mask dances are a pivotal element of the exhibition. Under the aegis of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, an international team led by Joseph Houseal of Core of Culture Dance Preservation

spent two years in Bhutan documenting 23 major temple festivals and dozens of smaller village events. The resulting wealth of material has been excerpted in the form of several short film sequences, now on view as part of the exhibition, and includes a large installation enabling visitors to experience the dance in three-dimensional form.

Films within the exhibition

“SMS from Shangri-La”

A film by Dieter Fahrner and Lisa Rösli, 2009, 75 minutes

English, Swiss German and Dzongkha with German subtitles

Start times: 11 am, 1 pm and 3 pm; Wed and Thu also at 6.30 pm

“Gross national happiness,” says the King of Bhutan, “is more important than gross national product.” But can happiness really be achieved by decree?

The film accompanies seven Swiss musicians on a tour of Bhutan. Between scenes from concerts and the band’s personal and musical experiences, it presents five portraits of very different people, all of whom explain what happiness means to them.

The film paints a subtle and yet highly personal picture of modern-day Bhutan. At the same time, it reflects on our own quest for a lost paradise, our longing for home and happiness – things which we suppose to be elsewhere and yet can only truly find in the here and now.

“Price of Knowledge”

“Price of Letter”

Two films by Ugyen Wangdi, 1998 and 2004, 35 and 68 minutes respectively

Original language with English subtitles

Start times: 11 am, 1 pm and 3 pm; Wed and Thu also at 6 pm

Every day, a ten-year-old boy embarks on a journey to school that takes him two-and-a-half hours there and back. A postman on his monthly round spends five days trekking on foot right up to the northern border. These films offer two striking portraits of contemporary Bhutan.

The Excavation of the Fortress of Drapham Dzong

Bhutan’s first-ever archaeological excavation began in 2008 and continues to this day: under Professor Werner Meyer of the University of Basel, Swiss and Bhutanese scholars and workers have joined forces to uncover a 16th century fortress. The dig is part of a larger project organised and financed by the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation for Archaeological Research Abroad (SLSA) and Helvetas. The Bhutanese government has expressed its desire to institutionalise the discipline of archaeology and raise awareness among the people of their cultural heritage. For the Bhutanese, who venerate objects buried in the ground as religious treasures, “history” as such has to date been distilled exclusively from canonical texts and handed down by oral tradition.

The excavation is presented and explained in a separate section of the exhibition.

Ritual worship

Every day at 10.30 am and 3 pm, within the exhibition galleries, the two monks Nima and Kinzang Thinlay spiritually purify the sacred objects. The ritual lasts approximately 20 minutes. During opening hours of the exhibition, they will produce a mandala with colourful sand.

SPONSORS

The show was organised by the Honolulu Academy of Arts in conjunction with the Department of Culture within the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

In Honolulu the art conservation, dance preservation and educational programmes were made possible by the generous support of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.

The exhibition "The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan" also received significant support from the E. Rhodes & Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, the Michael and Patricia O'Neill Charitable Fund, Susan Pillsbury, and Lawrence and Joyce Stupski, with the additional patronage of Le Burta G. Atherton, the Freeman Foundation, Hotels & Resorts of Halekulani, Japan Airlines, Drukair, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the W.L.S. Spencer Foundation.

The exhibition in Zurich has been made possible by the generous support of Novartis.

PUBLICATIONS

The exhibition is accompanied by a short catalogue in German, as well as by a comprehensive catalogue in English and French.

Bhutan – Heilige Kunst aus dem Himalaya

Museum Rietberg Zurich, 62 pp., approx. 40 colour illustrations, 24.5 x 29.5 cm
CHF 16, ISBN 978-3-907077-46-7

The Dragon's Gift – The Sacred Arts of Bhutan

Terese Tse Bartholomew and John Johnston (eds.), 390 pp., approx. 200 colour illustrations, 23.5 x 30.5 cm, Serindia Publications
CHF 68 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-932476-35-4
CHF 56 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-932476-36-1

PARALLEL EVENTS

Saturday, 4 September 2010

Long Night of Museums: Bhutan in Art, Music, Film and Ritual

Saturday, 17 September 2010

“klangkunst”: The Zurich Chamber Orchestra at the Museum Rietberg

Advance sales: Museum Rietberg or ZKO ticket office, 0848 84 88 44, (Mon–Thurs 11 am–5 pm),
billettkasse@zko.ch, www.zko.ch

Thursday, 23 and 30 September, 7 October 2010, 7.30–8.45 pm

“Bhutan – Sacred art from the Himalaya”

Lecture series in German at the Volkshochschule Zürich. To register: www.vhszh.ch

GUIDED TOURS OF THE EXHIBITION AND RELATED WORKSHOPS

For adults:

Public guided tours in German Sundays at 11 am, Wednesday at 6 pm, Thursdays at 12.15 pm

Private guided tours in English Please call + 41 44 206 31 11 / 31

Works of art in dialogue – an interactive guided tour for adults

Bhutan – Buddhist art from the Himalayan kingdom

Saturday, 10 July 2010, 10 am–12 pm

Padmasambhava – saint, great master and vanquisher of demons

Saturday, 18 September 2010, 10 am–12 pm

For adults and children:

Workshop for grandparents and grandchildren

Kira and Gho – national costumes in Bhutan

For grandparents accompanied by their grandchildren between the ages of 5 and 10

Wednesday, 1 September 2010, 2–4.30 p.m.

Family tour

Wingless white dragon. For families with children aged 5 and older

Sunday, 11 July 2010, 2–4.30 pm

Sunday, 26 September 2010, 2–4.30 pm

Children’s workshop

Bhutan, land of the dragons. For children between the ages of 7 and 12

Sunday, 29 August 2010, 10 am–12.30 pm

Sunday, 26 September 2010, 10 am–12.30 pm

INFORMATION AND CONTACT

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

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Opening hours: Tues – Sun 10 am – 5 pm | Wed and Thu 10 am – 8 pm

Admission: adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Public guided tours (in German): Sundays at 11 am, Wednesday at 6 pm, Thursdays at 12.15 pm

Guided tours in English: + 41 44 206 31 11 / 31

Parallel Events: www.rietberg.ch

Access: Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz»). No parking; disabled parking available.

RailAway offer By train to Museum Rietberg: www.railaway.ch
20% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.