

*The New York Times*

## ‘Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations’

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MARCH 20, 2014



Tenzing Rigdol's "Pin drop silence: Eleven-headed Avalokitesvara." Credit Tenzing Rigdol, Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Metropolitan Museum of Art*

*Through June 18*

Floating high in a small gallery above the Metropolitan Museum's South Asian and Southeast Asian galleries, the jewel of a show called "Tibet and India: Buddhist Traditions and Transformations" asks how a religion fading away in one place manages to find its way to and blossom in another. The mode of transmission is, at least in part, through art.

By the 11th century A.D., Buddhism's days in its homeland, Hindu-dominated India, were numbered. Institutionally, it survived primarily within great monastic universities, libraries and ateliers like Nalanda, a religious center of learning from the fifth century A.D., which was a go-to destination for countries outside of India desirous of checking their own versions of Buddhism against authoritative sources.

Tibet was one of these countries. It sent monks and artists over the Himalayas into India to study; simultaneously, their Indian counterparts found their way north. The show, organized by Kurt Behrendt, an assistant curator in the Asian art department, illustrates the dynamic of the exchange by bringing together a handful of objects, most from the museum's collection, from both sides of it.

Photo



A Buddha from the 11th or 12th century. Credit Metropolitan Museum of Art

One of the larger pieces is a high-relief black stone sculpture of the seated Buddha, seen touching the earth to ground himself at the moment of enlightenment. It was carved at Nalanda in the 10th or 11th century, possibly for insertion in the wall of a stupa, or shrine. Perhaps less than a century later we find the same image, now slightly sweetened, slimmed down and free-standing, cast from brass in Tibet.

Books were readily portable. Many Indian examples survived in Tibetan after the destruction of Nalanda by Muslim invaders around A.D. 1200. One of the finest examples anywhere is in the show: a manuscript written on dried palm leaves and illustrated with minute, fantastically vivacious figures. Such figures are basically all we know of a lost tradition of large-scale painting in India. And they served as models for a grand tradition of tangka painting under development in Tibetan and evident in rare 11th-century examples at the Met.

The chemistry of such cultural interchange was always complicated; you'll see it bubbling away if you walk throughout the South Asian galleries. And its experiments continue in monumental pieces by two contemporary Tibetan artists in the show.

One, Tenzing Rigdol, born to a Tibetan refugee family in Nepal in 1982, turns a painted image of a traditional Buddhist deity into a kind of jigsaw puzzle with crucial missing parts. And Gonkar Gyatso, born in Tibet in 1961, turns the earth-touching Buddha into a giant collage of corporate brand names and Twitter-style commentaries. Whether the figure is absorbing or radiating karma, good and bad, is impossible to say, but for sure in this visual *pièce de résistance*, transformations of Buddhist art and thought soar on.