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ASIA SOCIETY EXHIBITION IS FIRST TO EXAMINE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHIST PILGRIMAGE ON ASIAN ART

**EXHIBITION, CATALOGUE AND COMPANION PBS DOCUMENTARY FILM BY DAVID GRUBIN RECEIVE
\$1 MILLION NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES (NEH) CHAIRMAN'S SPECIAL AWARD**

Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art on view at Asia Society Museum
March 16–June 20, 2010



Portable Prayer Wheel, Tibet or Mongolia, 17th–18th century. Silver, green jadeite, rubies, and turquoise. H. 8 1/2 in. (21.6 cm)
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, Gift of John and Berthe Ford, 57.2285. Image © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art is the first-ever exhibition examining artistic production inspired by sacred sites and the practice of Buddhist pilgrimage in Asia. Through over ninety spectacular objects from significant North American museum and private collections, the exhibition aims to demonstrate the profound influence of Buddhist pilgrimage—both physical and mental—on Asian art over the past two millennia.

The exhibition comprises paintings, sculpture, textiles, manuscripts, ritual implements and reliquaries—augmented by maps, photographs and video—from India, Japan, Thailand, China, Bhutan and Tibet, and spanning the first through nineteenth centuries. A fully

illustrated 212-page color catalogue, with major essays from leading scholars on Buddhism and Buddhist art, published by Asia Society Museum in association with Yale University Press, accompanies the exhibition. A rich multimedia website will provide additional context.

The practice of pilgrimage is especially significant in Buddhism, and is linked very closely to the life and experiences of the Buddha. For this reason, *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art* is undertaken in conjunction with a companion two-hour documentary film biography *The Buddha*, narrated by Richard Gere, directed by the award-winning filmmaker David Grubin and airing on PBS in April. The documentary and the exhibition, which jointly received a Chairman's Special Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities, share research and artifacts and complement one another.

“Despite the fact that Buddhism—after Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism—is the world's fourth largest religion, the Buddha remains an exotic figure to many people, especially in the west,” says Asia Society Museum Director Melissa Chiu. “By examining pilgrimage as a central spiritual practice in Buddhism and exploring this subject in-depth and over two millennia, we aim to deepen understanding about the broad relationship between spirituality and art practice in Asia.”

Dr. Adriana Proser, Asia Society's John H. Foster Curator of Traditional Asian Art is the project's overall manager and curator of the exhibition. “Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art continues Asia Society's interest in fostering new scholarship that takes a thematic approach to Asian art, rather than a more conventional chronological or stylistic focus. It is my hope that the exhibition will illuminate how

Buddhist pilgrimage has affected art and how art, in turn, has influenced Buddhist pilgrimage across the multitude of Asian countries touched by Buddhism.”

Exhibition overview and organization

The practice of Buddhist pilgrimage began in South Asia with journeys to the sites where major events in the Buddha’s life took place—his birth at Lumbini; his enlightenment at Bodh Gaya; his first sermon at Sarnath; and his death at Kushinagara. As Buddhism spread to other areas of South Asia, the Himalayas, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, via overland and maritime trade routes, the practice of pilgrimage incorporated elements of existing local traditions. Exhibition objects, some of which have never been displayed publicly, are arranged to introduce the concepts of pilgrimage motivation and movement and worship at the sacred destination. Objects may be viewed as inspirational narratives, as guides for the faithful, as visual conduits to internal mental pilgrimage when physical pilgrimage is impossible, or as mementos and treasured souvenirs. The exhibition is organized into three sections: the first looks at the life of the Buddha and sacred pilgrimage sites, the second explores the journey and its components, and the third focuses on memory and mementos as an integral part of the pilgrimage experience.



Offering Cosmos Mandala, China or eastern Tibet, 18th century. Appliqué and embroidery on cloth. H. 32 3/4 x W. 21 1/2 in. (83.2 x 54.6 cm). Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, Gift of John and Berthe Ford, 35.302. Image © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland



Miniature Stupa with Illustrations of *Jataka* Tales. China. Five Dynasties period, 955. Bronze. H. 5 3/16 x W. 3 3/16 x D. 3 1/8 in. (13.2 x 8.1 x 7.9 cm). Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Nasli M. Heeramaneck, 1930.105. Photo by Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College

The Buddha and the Sacred Site

The historical Buddha, often called Shakyamuni (“Sage of the Shakyas”) in later times, was thought to have been born some time in the sixth century B.C.E., into an elite family of the Shakya clan, whose territory lay on what is now the border between northeastern India and Nepal. After renouncing a princely life for spiritual pursuit, he taught the Four Noble Truths: suffering exists in all life; suffering is caused by desire or attachment; to end suffering, one must transcend desire or attachment; and to transcend desire and attachment, one must follow the Noble Eightfold Path.

One of the works in this section, a fascinating Japanese Buddhist world map dated 1710, shows the spread of Buddhist sites across Asia. Many of these are places where relics, or purported relics, of the Buddha were buried, imbuing the sites with sacred powers. Buddhist pilgrimage sites began to spread across Asia as early as the third century B.C.E. when the Mauryan emperor Ashoka divided the relics of the Buddha and had them buried in 84,000 stupas (funerary mounds) across the southern continent. From there, sacred sites and

objects proliferated across Asia, represented in the exhibition by objects such as a tenth-century miniature stupa, thought to have been commissioned by Qian Chu (tenth-century Wuyue Kingdom, southeastern China), who followed Ashoka’s example and ordered the construction of 84,000 stupas.

The Journey

For centuries, visual aids related to each of the four Buddhist pilgrimage components—preparation, journey, adoration at the sanctified site and return to the mundane setting—have been produced that exhibit skillful craftsmanship and great aesthetic appeal. These include prayer wheels, which distribute the prayers of the pilgrim when they are turned, and traveling shrines. Sacred mountains, water, and sights are detailed in narrative carvings and paintings, that not only tell the tale of the life of the Buddha but also describe why and how pilgrimage sites were established and the arduous journeys pilgrims must make to them. A print by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

shows pilgrims in customary white robes making their way up Mount Fuji. They gather to rest before moving on toward a group worshipping in one of the mountain's numerous caves.

At East Asian and Himalayan pilgrimage sites, relics like incantations, sutras and other Buddhist paraphernalia may be concealed within sculptures of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. A striking example is the wood sculpture of Kshitigarbha (Jizō) on view in this section of the exhibition. Written prayers and invocations of Jizō and associated divinities, as well as one thousand tiny carved figures of Jizō, were placed inside the sculpture's torso and head to enliven it with spiritual power.



Katsushika Hokusai (Japanese, 1760–1849), Group of Mountain Climbers (*Shojin tozan*), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji (Fugaku San ju-Rokkei)*, Japan, Edo period, 1830–32. Color woodblock print. H. 9 5/8 x W. 14 11/16 in. (24.5 x 37.3 cm) The Art Institute of Chicago, Clarence Buckingham Collection, 1925.3241 Image: © The Art Institute of Chicago

An important component of pilgrimage is the spiritual journey or journey within. Within the Buddhist tradition there are aids that make pilgrimage possible when the physical journey is beyond reach. Many are in the form of mandalas, geometric designs that symbolize the universe, that serve as visual surrogates for sacred spaces. Several beautiful mandalas on view in this section of the exhibition combine Buddhist subject matter with imagery of local landscapes and deities.



Votive Plaque with Shadaksari Avalokiteshvara, Nepal, Mustang, 14th century, Clay
H. 3 1/2 x W. 2 3/4 x D. 15/16 in. (8.89 x 6.99 x 2.38 cm)
The John and Berthe Ford Collection . Image © The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland

Memory, Memento, and Sacred Bond

Mementos are an integral part of the Buddhist pilgrimage experience. For centuries craftsmen have created portable, mass-produced and affordable objects for devotees to add to their private shrines. Votive offerings and souvenirs—such as plaques, molds and miniature temple models—reproduce sculptures or architecture of sacred sites in form and spirit. These mementos have an enduring spiritual value once the pilgrim returns home, helping maintain a spiritual bond to the power and sanctity of the site and inspiring others to go on pilgrimage. In East Asia, books and scrolls displaying the stamps of temples along pilgrimage routes are treasured possessions, lovingly displayed or stored for posterity. A 14th century votive plaque from Nepal depicting Shadaksari Avolokiteshvara is one of several wonderful examples included in the exhibition.

Exhibition lenders

Lenders to the exhibition include: The James W. and Marilyn Alsdorf Collection; American Museum of Natural History, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Asian Art Museum of San Francisco; Mary and Jackson Burke Foundation; Mary Griggs Burke; C. V. Starr East Asian Library, University of California, Berkeley; Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY; The John and Berthe Ford Collection; Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Cambridge, MA; Indianapolis Museum of Art; Kenro Izu; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; MacLean Collection; Julia Meech; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The New York Public Library; Newark Museum; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Princeton University Art Museum; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; The Rubin Museum of Art, New York; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA; The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD; John C. Weber; and Zimmerman Family Collection. The exhibition also includes several important Buddhist objects from Asia Society's Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection.

About *The Buddha* documentary film and David Grubin Productions

David Grubin's related film, *The Buddha*, is the first documentary on PBS to explore the life story of Siddhartha Gautama, the historic Buddha and founder of the Buddhist faith. The documentary tells the story of the Buddha's life journey and its underlining relationship to Buddhist pilgrimage practice, drawing upon the work of some of the world's greatest artists and sculptors. Narrated by Richard Gere, this two-hour biography features interviews with the Dalai Lama and prominent Buddhists including W.S. Merwin, Robert Thurman and Trinh Xuan Thuan. David Grubin Productions has produced over 100 films on subjects ranging from history to art, and from poetry to science, winning David Grubin, the company President, every major award in his field, including three George Foster Peabody awards, two Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University awards, and ten Emmys.

Related programming and funding credits

Public programming to accompany *Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art* includes:

- Daylong multidisciplinary symposium—featuring artists, scholars, critics and writers such as Pico Iyer—exploring traditional and contemporary practices of pilgrimage, Saturday, April 17 at 10:00 a.m.
- Premiere screening of *The Buddha*, followed by a discussion and reception, on Tuesday, March 23 at 6:30 p.m.
- Member's lecture with exhibition curator Adriana Proser, "Spiritual Quest and Sacred Site: Making Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art" on Monday, March 15 at 7:00 p.m.

For further information and tickets, members of the public should visit www.AsiaSociety.org

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Asia Society Museum

Also on view at Asia Society Museum is the exhibition *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam: From River Plain to Open Sea* (February 2–May 2, 2010), organized by Asia Society, New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This remarkable exhibition brings together more than one hundred extraordinary objects on rare loan from ten leading Vietnamese museums. *Arts of Ancient Viet Nam* illuminates the country's long history as a center of trade and highlights its importance in the cultural development of Southeast Asia. Objects range from early burial goods and large bronze ritual drums to gold jewelry with precious stones, Hindu and Buddhist stone sculptures, and beautifully decorated ceramics. A full-color catalogue accompanies the exhibition.

Asia Society Museum presents groundbreaking exhibitions and artworks, many previously unseen in North America. The Museum is known for its permanent collection of masterpiece-quality works gifted to the society by Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd. Through its exhibitions and related public programs, Asia Society provides a forum for the issues and viewpoints reflected in both traditional and contemporary Asian art. Founded in 1956, Asia Society is a nonprofit educational institution with offices in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Melbourne, Mumbai, New York, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai and Washington, D.C.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$10, seniors \$7, students \$5 and free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. For more information, visit www.AsiaSociety.org