ACROSS SHARED WATERS
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS IN DIALOGUE WITH TIBETAN ART
FROM THE JACK SHEAR COLLECTION

WILLIAMS COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART
FEBRUARY 17–JULY 16, 2023
Across Shared Waters encapsulates the diversity and richness of Tibetan art by presenting historical Buddhist art alongside contemporary works by artists of Tibetan and Himalayan heritage.

Much as high Himalayan glaciers provide the headwaters for rivers that flow throughout Asia, for centuries Tibetans actively contributed to the vast overland trade networks that connected societies across Asia and Europe. Artists and pilgrims moved alongside commercial goods, contributing to the stream of objects and ideas, which in turn supported the flourishing of a range of worldviews and religious traditions, including Buddhism.

More recently, Tibetans in China have had more opportunities to travel and study abroad, while an extended diaspora has led to the establishment of Tibetan communities around the world. These experiences within multiple cultures reverberate through the whole of Tibetan art as artists both traditional and contemporary engage creatively with established forms and innovate new approaches.

This exhibition draws from a generous planned gift of traditional Tibetan Buddhist art by Jack Shear to be shared between Williams College, Skidmore College, and
Shakyamuni Buddha with Arhats and Four Guardian Kings, 1700–1799. Distemper on cloth, Central Tibetan style. Maker(s) not known by WCMA. The Jack Shear Collection of Himalayan Art.
Vassar College. These works highlight the sophistication of Tibetan Buddhist philosophies and practices, and the talents of historical artists who gave them form. The degree to which Buddhism has shaped Tibetan culture is significant, reflected in the frequency with which some contemporary artists respond to, reimagine, and repurpose traditional Buddhist forms to express their lived experiences and to comment on globalization and commercialization. Of course, not all Tibetans are Buddhist, and not all contemporary artists of Himalayan heritage employ Buddhist imagery in their work. In these paintings, photographs, and sculptures we can find themes that include exploration of identity, cultivation of inner worlds, and confrontation of others’ expectations.

Buddhism is the predominant religious tradition throughout recorded Tibetan history, and it remains a cultural force in
many Tibetan societies today. At the core of Buddhism are the life and deeds of Siddhartha Gautama, the man who would become Shakyamuni Buddha, and whose teachings help followers cultivate wisdom, overcome suffering, and remove obstacles to progress.

Much as the life of Shakyamuni Buddha is the touchstone of Buddhism, his form is the gateway to learning traditional arts. The first lesson given to aspiring traditional artists is how to properly draw the Buddha, a process that takes many months of consistent effort. By the 2nd century CE, artists were producing images of Shakya-muni Buddha, and the Buddhist tradition had spread far from its Indian homeland. As Buddhist philosophies diversified and different lineages emerged, artists were commissioned to produce the paintings, sculptures, and ritual objects that are at the core of these traditions’ material culture.

Drawing in part from Indian antecedents known as paṭa, artists active in Tibetan areas developed rolled, portable paintings called thangka that are hung during Buddhist rituals, festivals, initiations, and contemplative or instructional exercises. Buddhist devotees and masters may commission a painting—or a set of paintings—as a merit-making act, as consecrated images are believed to have the capacity to educate and enlighten, benefiting patrons and viewers alike.

By educating followers about the countless setbacks Siddhartha Gautama suffered and the innumerable insights he experienced before achieving enlightenment, his life—and previous lives—provides practitioners with a template for success. Paintings and sculptures have been critical instruments in sharing key Buddhist lessons, especially prior to the mid-20th century, when most Tibetan audiences were not formally educated.

Shakyamuni Buddha is frequently encountered in the posture associated with the
Thirteenth Karmapa Düdül Dorjé (1722–1798) Surrounded by Lineage Masters, 19th century. Distemper on cloth, Eastern Tibetan style. Maker(s) not known by WCMA. The Jack Shear Collection of Himalayan Art
moment of his enlightenment, seated cross-legged with his right hand stretched down to touch the earth. His status as a Buddha, or Awakened One, is reflected in the multicolored light that surrounds his body and the lotus that supports him, as well as the protuberance from his head (tsuktor) that is said to have spontaneously emerged at the moment of his transformation from Siddhartha Gautama into Shakyamuni Buddha.

The rest of Shakyamuni’s time on earth was spent teaching what he had learned. Among those he gathered as disciples were royalty, laypeople, monks, and nuns. Sixteen of his closest and most accomplished students, “Realized Ones” known in Tibetan as drachompa, appear around him, while four monk attendants stand on either side of a table piled with offerings. Two other attendants appear at the bottom center: the rotund Hva Shang, who is associated with children, and Dharmatala, who carries texts on his back as he walks alongside his tiger companion. Armor-clad figures in the bottom corners protect the four cardinal directions—north and west on the bottom right, and south and east at bottom left—indicating that the entire composition is considered sacred space.

After perfecting their ability to make the Buddha image, artists working in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition expand their skills, ultimately mastering hundreds of deities and teachers; however, the Buddha’s multivalent symbolism and international ubiquity have made his form an endless source of inspiration for contemporary artists, some of whom are traditionally trained. One of the Tibetan pioneers of contemporary art, Karma Phuntsok, draws upon his mastery of line to render an iconographically perfect image of a golden-hued Shakyamuni Buddha at the moment of enlightenment. Yet instead of surrounding the Buddha with elements rendered in the highly linear style of most traditional Tibetan painting, he is presented amidst a photorealistic lush tropical environment that situates him firmly within the natural, living world.
མོང་ཐུབ་མེད་པའི་དུས་སྐབས་དེར། བོད་བརྒྱུད་ནང་བསྟན་ཆོས་ལུགས་བསླབ་པར་ཐང་ག་དང་སྐྱ་བརྙན་སོགས་ནི་བོད་བརྒྱུད་ནང་བསྟན་བརྒྱུད་སྤྱེེལ་འཛིན་གསུམ་ལ་གལ་གནད་ཅན་གྱིི་ཡོ་ཆས་སུ་གྱུར་བ་རེད།

སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པ་སངས་རྒྱས་པའི་བར་སྐབས་ཏེ། སྐྱིལ་ཀྲུང་དུ་བཞུགས་ནས་ཕྱག་གཡས་ཀྱིས་ས་ལ་རེག་ཙམ་མཛད་པ་ནི་དུས་རྒྱུན་མཐོང་བའི་སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པའི་གཟུགས་བརྙན་དེ་ཡིན་ལ། འོད་ཐིག་སྣ་ཚོགས་ཀྱིས་གཟུགས་བརྙན་དེའི་རྒྱབ་ནས་ཤར་ཞིང་མེ་ཏོག་པདྨ་མང་བོས་བསྐོར་བར་བྱས་ཡོད་པ་དང་། ཁོང་གི་དབུའི་གཙུག་ཏོར་དེ་ནི་གོ་ཏ་མ་སངས་རྒྱས་ཏེ་སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པ་གྱུར་བའི་བར་སྐབས་དེ་ལ་རང་བཞིན་གྱིིས་བྱུང་བར་ངོས་འཛིན་བྱེད་ཀྱི་ཡོད།

སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པ་མི་ཡུལ་དུ་བཞུགས་པའི་གནས་སྐབས་སུ། ཁོང་གིས་གཙོ་བོ་རང་གིས་རྟོགས་པ་བརྙེས་པའི་ཡོན་ཏན་ནས་དཔེ་ཁྲིད་གནང་པ་རེད་ལ། ཁོང་གི་དཔེ་ཁྲིད་གནང་ཡུལ་ནི་རྒྱལ་བརྒྱུད་དང་། གྲྭ་བ། བཙུན་མ། མི་སྐྱ་སོགས་ཡིན། སྟོན་པའི་སློབ་མ་ཤེས་ཡོན་ཅན་ཏེ་དགྲོ་བཅོམ་པ་བཅུ་དྲུག་གིས་ཁོང་གི་མཐའ་སྐོར་ཞིང་དགེ་འདུན་པ་བཞི་ནི་མཆོད་རྫས་ཀྱིས་ཁེངས་པའི་ཅོག་ཙེའི་གཡས་གཡོན་དུ་ལངས་ཡོད་པ་དང་། དེའི་གཤམ་དུ་བཞུགས་པ་ནི་ཧྭ་ཤང་དང་དགེ་བསྙེན་དྷར་མ་ཏ་ལ་སྟེ། རྒྱབ་ལ་གླེགས་བམ་འཁུར་ཤིང་སྟག་ཁྲིད་བཞིན་ཡོད། གཤམ་གྱིི་གྲུ་ཟུར་དུ་གོ་ཁྲབ་མནབས་མཁན་ནི་རི་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕྱོགས་བཞིར་སངས་རྒྱས་ཀྱི་བསྟན་པ་སྲུང་ཞིང་སྐྱོང་བའི་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་རིགས་བཞི་སྟེ། གཡས་ཟུར་དུ་བྱང་གི་རྒྱལ་ཆེན་འཕགས་སྐྱེས་པོ་དང་ཤར་གྱིི་ཡུལ་འཁོར་སྲུང་བཅས་ཡིན།

སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པའི་གཟུགས་བརྙན་འཐུས་ཚང་ཞིག་གྲུབ་རྗེས། རི་མོ་སྒྱུ་རྩལ་བ་དག་གིས་རང་ནུས་ཅི་ལྕོགས་བགྱིིས་བོད་བརྒྱུད་ནང་བསྟན་པའི་ལྷ་ཚོགས་དང་བླ་བརྒྱུད་སོགས་བརྒྱ་ཕྲག་མང་བོའི་གཟུགས་བརྙན་གསར་བསྐྲུན་བྱེད་ཐུབ་ཡོད་ཀྱང་། བསྟན་དོན་དང་དོན་སྙིང་སྣ་འཛོམས་ཤིང་རྒྱལ་སྤྱིའི་གང་ས་གང་དུ་ཁྱབ་པའི་སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པའི་གཟུགས་བརྙན་དེ་ནི་དེང་རབས་སྒྱུ་རྩལ་རི་མོ་བའི་འཆར་སྣང་གི་འབྱུང་ཁུངས་ཤིག་ཏུ་གྱུར་ཡོད་པ་དང་། དེའི་ཁྲོད་ཀྱི་སྒྱུ་རྩལ་རི་མོ་བ་ཁག་གཅིག་ལ་སྲོལ་རྒྱུན་རི་མོའི་འབྲི་ཚུལ་ཐད་ཀྱི་སྦྱོང་བརྡར་ཡང་བྱས་ཡོད། སྟོན་པ་ཤཱཀྱ་ཐུབ་པའི་དངོས་ཡོད་ཀྱི་འདྲ་པར་ཇི་བཞིན་རང་བྱུང་གི་ནགས་ཚལ་སྟུག་པོ་ཞིག་ཏུ་སྲོག་ཆགས་དང་མཉམ་གནས་ཡོད་པ་ཞིག་བྲིས་ཡོད།
Another leader in the Tibetan contemporary art movement, Gonkar Gyatso, has revisited Buddha forms throughout his career. In an untitled series, he used a three-dimensional scan of a 14th century sculpture of Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment to make a mold. Whereas traditional sculptures are handcrafted using special metal alloys, Gyatso’s molded, easily reproducible forms are made from comparatively inexpensive resin with bronze finish, which can be read as representative of the impacts of commodification. Headless, the figures have no mechanisms for expression, thought, or sensory input, perhaps symbolizing the impossibility of meaningful engagement when the rational mind is not present.

Other works by Gyatso explore expectations often imposed upon modern Tibetans by non-Tibetans. Both he and Nyema Droma, born in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, spent time in England, where they were exposed to foreigners’ presumptions about “Tibetans” as a constructed—and often misinformed—category. Both artists turned to photography to express their experiences. Gyatso partnered with photographer Zhadui to take a series of portraits of his family members in their various occupations and lifestyles—tour guide, postal worker, policewoman, nun, student—to illustrate the diversity within a modern, multigenerational family in Lhasa. Droma’s portraits of Tibetan youth inside and outside China push viewers to confront their expectations of what Tibetans “look like.” Her series Performing Tibetan Identities presents Tibetans in pairs of portraits: one rather muted, in which the subject wears traditional dress; in the second, each sitter presents themselves in ways that reflect their vibrant, multifaceted lives.

Unlike Gyatso and Droma, which features the work of Tibetans with varied experiences and careers, until recently, the surviving Tibetan historical record focused almost exclusively on the religious, social, and
political elites. These individuals, overwhelmingly male, constituted the successive lineage traditions that passed cumulative knowledge across generations. One lineage, the Karma Kagyü, is credited with establishing reincarnation as their mechanism for transferring leadership. Each time that the head of the tradition, called the Karmapa, passes away, his rebirth is sought out and confirmed by a group of close advisors, who then assist in training and educating the reincarnated master until he is able to assume the throne. This system of knowledge sharing situates the reincarnation within the tradition’s larger continuum and also establishes his legitimacy to lead. It proved so efficacious that by the 14th century, other Tibetan Buddhist traditions also began recognizing reincarnations.
Given their importance, the successive incarnations have often been the subjects of paintings. Compositions may be condensed, with the full lineage in a single work, or each incarnation presented individually, so that the full lineage necessitates a set of paintings. As an example of the latter, Sachen Künga Nyingpo, a master of the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, is considered a previous incarnation of the Dalai Lamas. He is shown in hierarchical scale, seated near a table laden with ritual implements and offerings, with his home monastery shown in the distance. Above him in the sky are a blue meditational deity and an Indian master credited with contributing many teachings to the Sakya canon. At lower right is a dark blue figure surrounded by flames—the Lord of the Tent (Gurgyi Gönpo), one of the foremost protective figures for Sakya tradition practitioners.

When encountered by cultural outsiders, protectors such as the Lord of the Tent often cause misunderstandings, with uninformed viewers at times mistakenly presuming the figures were demons. In fact, the Lord of the Tent and other wrathful-looking figures are representations of the power available to initiated practitioners—a power that helps them overcome obstacles. Obstacles can refer both to external forces that cause problems, such as illness, or internal impediments like anger or ego that are preventing progress on the Buddhist path. Essentially, these figures, and the images and practices associated with them, are considered beneficent embodiments of fierce compassion, like parents removing obstacles that could harm their children.

In addition to protectors, Buddhism provides followers with multiple tools and resources to navigate problems. Among the tools are mandalas, which support Buddhist initiates in their visualization practices. Each mandala is specific to a particular deity and their retinue, and
Tsepakmé, the Buddha of Unlimited Life, 19th century. Distemper on cloth, Eastern Tibet style. Maker(s) not known by WCMA. The Jack Shear Collection of Himalayan Art
situates them in a multistoried, ornate palace in which each figure’s gesture, position, and implement represents an aspect of Buddhist philosophy. Ideally, as a practitioner meditates on each element of the mandala and its symbolism, they increase their understanding of Buddhist principles, which include cultivating recognition of the inherent “sameness” of all things, so that the palace of the deity is interchangeable with the physical world in which the practitioner lives, transcending the tendency to separate internal and external space. Explorations of the conceptions of space and time also fuel the work of contemporary artist Marie-Dolma Chophel, in which abstract forms invite viewers to contemplate what constitutes space, how we create and perceive it, and how we can imagine ourselves within it.

Tibetan artists, based around the world, continue to adapt and create, drawing from their rich and varied lives to produce meaningful and thought-provoking work. At the same time, modern technologies have provided Tibetans with more opportunities to represent themselves before larger, truly global audiences. Artists working in contemporary modes provide incisive commentary and critique, offering viewers avenues for reflection, exploration, and connection. The historical works in Across Shared Waters share some of the wide range of functions and forms that constitute traditional Tibetan Buddhist art. Works from the Shear Collection provide opportunities for understanding the many ways that thangka function: to educate viewers on the life and teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni and other masters, to document and honor Tibetan teaching lineages, to provide support for meditational practices, and to aid followers as they encounter challenges in their lives. Talented master painters continue to train students of all backgrounds in Tibetan styles of Buddhist art, with the goal of ensuring that these traditions continue to flow into the future.

Tibetan translation provided by Rongwo Lugyal
Related programming

Opening Celebration for Across Shared Waters: Contemporary Artists in Dialogue with Tibetan Art from the Jack Shear Collection
February 24, 2023
4–6 p.m.

Public Tour of Across Shared Waters with Ariana Maki
February 25, 2023
10–11 a.m.

An evening with Georges Dreyfus: What is a tantric deity and how to become one
March 9, 2023
7–8:30 p.m.

Art & Mindfulness Meditation with Tashi Chodron
Saturday April 15, 2023
3–5 p.m.

Artist Residency: Lama Tashi Norbu
April 21–28, 2023
April 27, 5–7 p.m.: Public performance and exhibition viewing

Public Tour of Across Shared Waters with Ariana Maki & Closing Celebration July 14, 2023
5–7 p.m.

With additional programs in collaboration with AASIA (Asian American Students in Action). Visit artmuseum.williams.edu for updates.

On the cover: Lama Tashi Norbu, Accepting Flowers’ Culture, 2013, The Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection; Shakyamuni Buddha with Arhats and Four Guardian Kings, 1700–1799, The Jack Shear Collection of Himalayan Art

Visit artmuseum.williams.edu for updates.