

MFA Show Mixes Modern Interpretations of Shambhala With Extraordinary Collection of Restored Tibetan Thangkas

The Museum of Fine Arts offers an opportunity to visit a mythical kingdom, and see the whole world in the process, through Sep. 30. “Seeking Shambhala,” on the second-floor in the Asian galleries, represents the culmination of nearly two decades of effort on the part of a curator to restore a collection of Tibetan thangkas acquired a century ago by the museum. It also included work by two contemporary artists that demonstrates the ongoing relevance of such a seeking.

Shambhala is a place of peace and happiness located somewhere in the parts of Asia that seemed remote a couple of millennia ago, when the concept first arose in Hindu cultures of India. The person who eventually became the Buddha is said to have visited that kingdom and instructed its kings in right living, teachings that are collected in the Kalachakra tantra. This concept has stuck with Buddhism ever since, being a central part of the “Pure Land” Buddhism of Japan, for example.

A thangka is “a Tibetan silk painting with embroidery, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala of some sort,” according to Wikipedia. They are usually attached to silk material which is designed to hang on a wall and be rolled up for storage as if they were scrolls. The collection acquired by the MFA in 1906 included nearly two dozen that had already been stripped from their original silk banners. In 1910 the images were mounted on wood, and that’s the way they were exhibited and stored for the next century until Jacki Elgar, the head of Asian Conservation, came across them in the 1990s.

Between then and now she has overseen more than 4,000 hours of work to restore these magnificent images of the kings of Shambhala to their original form. Among many other tasks, she had to find appropriate silk weaving for the new hangings—when you visit the exhibit you will see that each painting has a silk frame (material from Tibet that was not easy to acquire) and a bluish background of a luxurious weave from Taiwan. Over all the scrolls is a yellow and red material that can be used for covering the images, and these covers all came from monasteries in Nepal.

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Not all the kings are represented, but you will find the current king on the right-hand side as you face the contemporary statue of Buddha at the far end of the gallery; he is scheduled to reign until 2027, having first sat on the throne in 1927. Each scroll is a marvel of detail, and Elgar has chosen other objects, like small sculptures or bound sutras from the MFA's Asian collections, to complement them.

The Buddha at the end of the gallery is the work of Gonkar Gyatsu, a Tibetan artist who incorporates many contemporary elements into his work, most notably the stickers that children love to play with. You will find as you approach that this Buddha is completely covered in these stickers, as well as price tags and larger symbols. Your eye will seek out patterns, and be happy with finding them. Another work by Gyatsu near the entrance to this gallery consists of four large square panels that combine to represent a large head of a Buddha, with the rays of illumination haloing its head composed of these stickers and snippets of text cut from newspapers of many languages.

Around the corner is another work executed on four large panels—but this one shows Gyatsu sitting before four different easels in four different costumes and four different locations. This is intended to comment on the multiple identities of the artist—as a Tibetan artist, as a refugee in India, as a citizen of mainland China, and as a resident of the U.S.A. The original photograph of a traditional thangka painter that inspired these images is close by, as are a couple of elements from two of the photographs. Tadanori Yokoo is another artist inspired by the concept of Shambhala. He was trying to find it through yoga and meditation, until he dreamed about a visit by a monk who said “I bring the King of Shambhala.” When Yokoo looked, he only saw pure light, and he took this as a hint to “look within himself for inner peace.” This search resulted in a series of silk-screened images collectively called SHAMBALA (1974), that hangs on the left of the gallery. Among these is a picture that was repurposed for the cover of a paperback novel; you will very likely recognize it because a year later its central element was re-repurposed to become the iconic cover of Pink Floyd's most widely recognized album.

As you explore this gallery you will find things that remind you of Egypt and Europe, Asia and America, and you will notice that many different languages are represented in the fine print of the Buddha's halo. The Pure Land is not only some remote place in faraway Asia, but a place that anyone, anywhere, anytime can find with enough patience and discipline. The next gallery over is one of the most popular in the MFA—the Buddhist Temple Room. If you can't find peace there, you're not looking carefully enough.

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