



Legends and Myths in Himalayan Art

ONCE UPON MANY TIMES

**RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART**

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INTRODUCTION



A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS.

This adage aptly characterizes the topic of this exhibition—the diverse narrative artistic traditions prevalent in Tibetan culture.

For the past millennia Tibetan narrative painting has reflected the rich Buddhist lore of stories, morality tales, and legends initially mostly related to the Buddha's life story, his teachings, and events that span his many lives. These numerous moral biographies originated in India and were embraced in Tibet, where they were adapted to local circumstances, leading to the creation of purely Tibetan narratives.

Tibetan teachers with the help of Indian masters invited to Tibet introduced, translated, and integrated Indian Buddhist culture with a great sense of purpose over the span of several centuries. The artistic expressions of a number of stories presented in this exhibition were modeled after the known Indian visual conventions. Many other stories and their pictorial presentations were developed by the Tibetans

FIG. 1

Scenes illustrating the drama "Drowa Sangmo," Detail
Tibet, Lukhang Temple, second floor, north wall mural; 1650–1710
Geglee Print Reproduction
Mural size: 51% x 80¼ in. (131.127 x 203.835 cm)
Thomas Laird and Clint Clemens © 2009
Rubin Museum of Art; PH 2009.5.8

themselves and skillfully communicate important aspects of their own culture in order to maintain their religious traditions, inspire spiritual achievements, share myths of the land and its heroes, recount moral tales, or relate their everyday lives to the higher purposes demanded by Buddhist teachings. Each of these objectives invites a certain way of engaging with the images.

This brochure surveys the main themes expressed in Tibetan pictorial narratives: the Buddha's stories, life stories of masters—histories and wonders, stories of spiritual quests and divine protection—and popular dramas (FIG. 1).

IT ALL BEGINS WITH THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA.

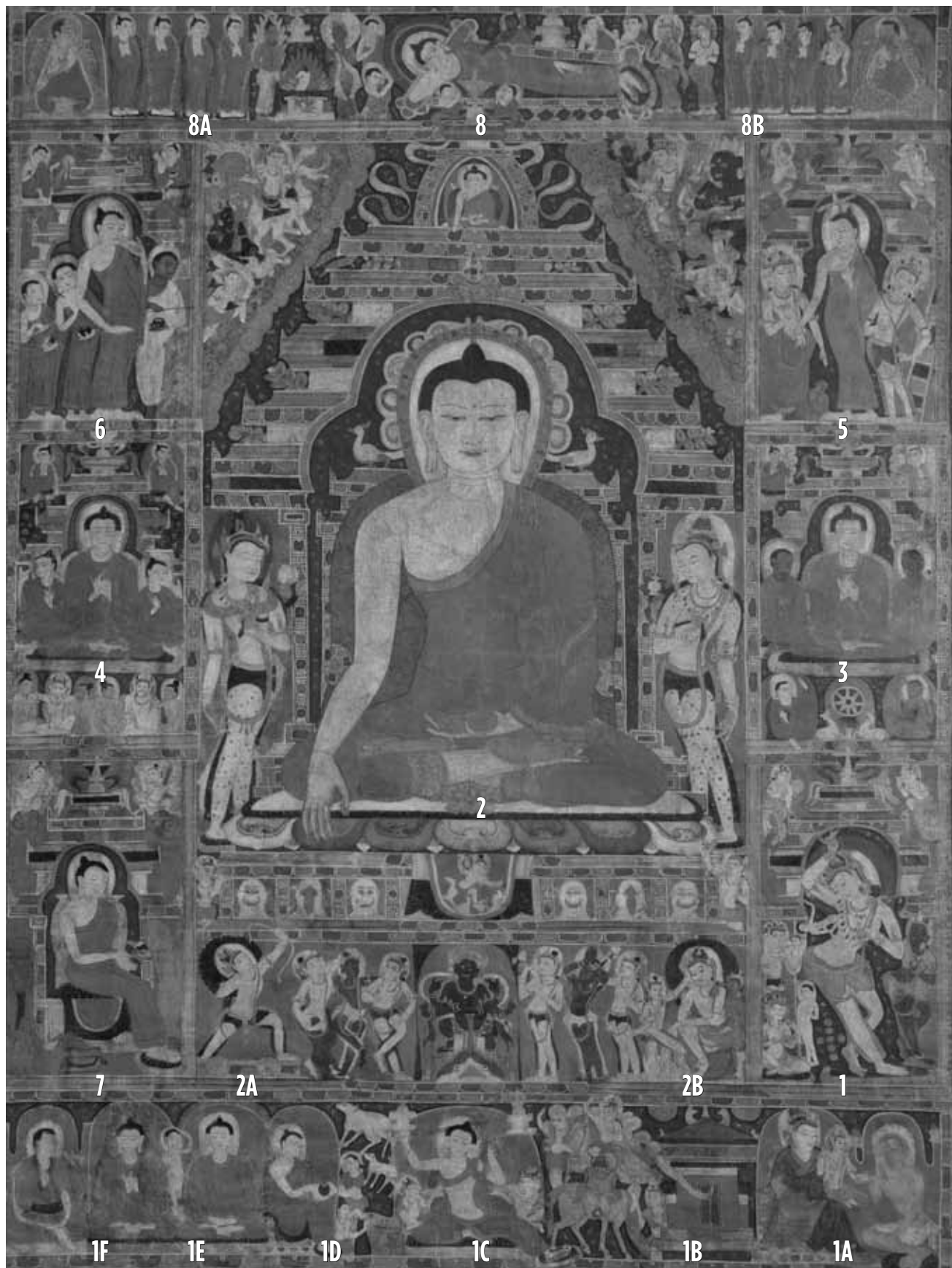
The story tells of a young prince who renounced his palace life to seek spiritual liberation. After years of searching, he attained it and taught others the path. Most sources agree that the Buddha's teachings and the biographical accounts of his journey toward the goal of spiritual awakening were originally recounted orally. The exact dates of the Buddha's life are still debated, but he is believed to have lived sometime between the sixth and fourth century BCE. His full life story was not written down until the second century CE, but visual narratives of numerous episodes from his life and previous lives have been the main subject of Buddhist art from its very beginning and continue to be represented in various sculptural and painted forms in all Buddhist cultures up to the present.

THE BUDDHA'S STORIES



FIG. 2

The Eight Great Events of the
Buddha's Life
Tibet, ca. 13th century
Pigments on cloth; 41¾ x 30¾ in.
(106 x 78cm)
Private Collection, Switzerland



8A

8

8B

6

5

4

3

2

7

2A

2B

1

1F

1E

1D

1C

1B

1A

Tibetan depictions related to the life of the Buddha vary and can be found in murals as well as scroll paintings. Among the earliest such scrolls is this rare painting (FIG. 2) that shows the scenes of the eight great events of the Buddha's life. The representations of the eight events as a visual convention developed in India during the fifth through the ninth century and became prominent in the medieval art of numerous Buddhist countries, from the Indian kingdoms of Pala and Sena, to Newar city states, to Central Asian empires, to Tibetan and Burmese kingdoms. This scroll shows the scenes of the eight events within architectural structures but does not represent the events as occurring within the structures. It visually refers to commemorative stupa shrines at the sites where the events occurred.

Integral to this visual tradition of representing the eight events was an oral, or literary, tradition recorded in the *Praises (stotras) to the Caityas at the Eight Great Places of the Buddha* found in Tibetan and Chinese translations from Sanskrit made around the tenth to eleventh century. In addition to praising the monuments associated with the Buddha, these texts promoted the reproduction of the related images. The events depicted and mentioned in the *Praises* are (see FIG. 3):

- 1 Birth at Lumbini
- 2 Enlightenment at Vajrasana/Bodhgaya
- 3 First Teaching at Sarnath
- 4 Multiplication Miracle at Shravasti
- 5 Descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods at Samkasya
- 6 Taming of a Mad Elephant at Rajgir
- 7 Accepting a Gift of Honey at Vaishali
- 8 Parinirvana (passing away) at Kushinagara

Additional scenes related to the Buddha's birth and several episodes from his life before enlightenment are shown in the lower register, starting in the lower-right corner:

- 1A The astrologer Asita was invited to divine the child's future and revealed that he would become either a great ruler or a spiritual teacher.
- 1B The Great Departure relates the future Buddha's leaving the palace with the help of gods and in the company of his charioteer/groom, whom he sends back to the palace with his horse, shown here by a riderless horse.
- 1C The Buddha-to-be cuts his own hair, exchanges his clothing with a beggar, and begins his ascetic life.
- 1D The Teasing of the Buddha-to-be occurred when he sat motionless for a long time, and some shepherd boys took him for an earth spirit (*yakṣa*) statue and tried to put sticks in his ears.
- 1E The episode of Sujata's Gift took place after six years of austerities, when the Buddha-to-be was nearing death from starvation, realized that the severe physical asceticism is not the path, and accepted the gift of food from a girl, Sujata.
- 1F During one of the Buddha's contemplative sessions, when torrential rain was falling, the king of serpents opened his multiheaded hood to form a protective canopy above the seated Buddha.

Additional scenes related to the Buddha's enlightenment:

- 2A The demon Mara's army attacks the Buddha.
- 2A-B The Buddha is victorious over the demon Mara (see Mara and his daughters below the throne). On the left he is attacking the Buddha with a bow and arrow, and on the right he is seated in acceptance of his defeat. His three daughters are also shown in two distinct attitudes toward the Buddha—on the left they are in seductive dancing poses, and on the right they are raising their arms in adoration.

FIG. 3
The Eight Great Events with
numbered scenes



Another painting from a much later time, *Life Story of Buddha Shakyamuni* (FIG. 4), presents the life of the Buddha in a different aesthetic, iconographic, and compositional convention from Figure 2.

This painting communicates the story of the twelve deeds of the Buddha and closely corresponds to the traditional recounting of the Buddha's great achievements recorded in *Praises to the Twelve Deeds of the Buddha* as found in the eleventh-century translations from Sanskrit within the Tibetan canon. (The enumeration of the twelve deeds found in scholastic commentaries varies from those listed in *Praises* and depicted in Figure 4.) Several scenes in this painting demonstrate that the artist had some awareness of the established visual conventions for representing the eight great events but incorporated additional events into its structure.

Some scholars recently suggested that “seeing Buddhist art involved quite a bit of listening.” Recitation of the lines from *Praises* that reiterated the Buddha's deeds may have been part of this “listening” aspect. It is notable that neither painting (FIGS. 2 and 4) contains identifying captions, suggesting that to an informed viewer their pictorial content reflected well-known cultural conventions.

The Twelve Deeds of the Buddha as recounted in the *Praises to the Twelve Deeds* and shown in Figure 4 (including additional scenes):

- 1 Decides to be reborn while residing in Tushita Heaven
- 2 Conception: like a great white elephant descends to earth and enters the womb of Mayadevi
- 3 Takes Birth:
 - 3A the Birth at Lumbini Grove
 - 3B first steps;
 - 3C prediction of two possible destinies by the astrologer Asita
- 4 Becomes proficient in princely arts and games and so forth
- 5 Assumes retinue and a queen, lives the worldly life
- 6 Perceives that worldly affairs are insubstantial:
 - 6A encounters an old person, a sick person, a corpse, and meets an ascetic
 - 6B leaves the palace
 - 6C renounces the world, i.e., cuts his hair and becomes an ascetic
- 7 Practices austerities for six years
- 8 Attains Perfect and Complete Enlightenment:
 - 8A sits under the Bodhi Tree and is victorious over Mara
 - 8B awakens to perfect enlightenment
- 9 Teaches (Turns the Wheel of Dharma)
 - 9A teaches his first disciples, or Turns the Wheel of Dharma, for the first time at Sarnath Deer Park
 - 9B turns the Wheel of Dharma for the second time at Vulture Peak near Rajgir to an assembly of bodhisattvas, gods, and other beings
- 10 Prevents division of his followers (*sangha*); tames a mad elephant at Rajgir
- 11 Performs other miracles:
 - 11A descends from the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods after teaching his mother
 - 11B miracles at Shravasti and conversion of nonbelievers
 - 11C accepts a gift of honey from a monkey at Vaishali and predicts his own impending death
- 12 Manifests His Great Passing (Parinivana) at Kushinagara
 - 12A leaves his physical body
 - 12B manifests signs of great passing during cremation, with wondrous lights and flowers falling from the sky; leaves relics

FIG. 4

Life Story of Buddha Shakyamuni
Tibet, 19th century
Pigments on cloth; 41% x 31½ in.
(13.176 x 80.01 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.164 (HAR 157)

THE TEACHER AS THE BUDDHA



FIG. 5
Life Story of Tsongkapa (1357–1419)
Himalayan region; 15th century
Pigments on cloth; 50¼ x 38 in
(128.9 x 96.52 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
F1996.5.1 (HAR 410)

A PICTURE IS A WRITTEN HISTORY.

Not all Tibetan narrative paintings invited a complementary oral component. Some of them, often created as a series devised and commissioned by prominent Tibetan masters in order to communicate historical developments of their particular traditions, are straightforward illustrative narratives. They commonly include captions that identify specific scenes. Such paintings were frequently the visual renditions of written biographies (*namthar*) of lineage masters and important teachers of their tradition (FIG. 5).

The teachers were usually depicted with iconography similar to the Buddha's: their figures are larger than the others in the painting, displaying gestures (*mudras*) symbolically indicating their enlightened status or their role as teacher

and holding implements identifying them as emanations of deities. Compositional structure, as is the case with this painting narrating the life of Tsongkapa, is also comparable to the early depictions related to the life of the Buddha. The large central figure of Tsongkapa (1357–1419), the founding master of the Gelug Tibetan tradition, is shown surrounded by smaller, captioned scenes from his life.

Depictions of life stories of masters probably make up the majority of Tibetan narrative paintings, and the manner in which these narratives are presented, perceived, and maintained is as varied as the paintings themselves.

FIG. 6

Portable Mani Shrine (Tashi Gomang)
of Copper Palace of Padmasambhava
Bhutan; 18th-19th century
Painted and gilded wood, clay; 30¼ x 12
x 12 in. (76.517 x 30.48
x 30.48 cm)
Private Collection

FIG. 7

Life Story of Padmasambhava (detail)
Tibet; 19th century
Pigments on cloth; 40¼ x 26¾ in.
(103.5 x 66.99 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2007.16.1 (HAR 81832)



MIRACULOUS ACCOMPLISHMENTS, DIVINE INTERVENTIONS, AND PERSONAL DRAMAS

A PICTURE IS WORTH A HUNDRED SONGS.

In Tibetan culture, involvement with and aesthetic appreciation of the art is most direct when it is used in narrative performances by traveling storytellers (*lama mani*). The stories performed by these itinerant storytellers in front of paintings and special portable shrines (see FIG. 6) are usually well-known versions of the legendary achievements of famous religious masters and mythologized historical personages who are generally considered emanations of deities.

Among such popular stories is the life of the Indian master Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche (The Precious Teacher, FIG. 7). In addition to his miraculous

birth and amazing life full of magical feats that preceded his journey to Tibet, he is also traditionally credited with playing a major role in the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism. This popular narrative, in turn, is closely related to Tibetan imperial historiographies that portray King Trisong Detsen (742-796 CE) as an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the patron deity of Tibet (FIG. 8), and an enlightened ruler responsible for making Buddhism the state religion. Early Tibetan histories echoed in popular narratives also describe this king as the principal disciple of Padmasambhava and resolute Buddhist patron who invited the famous Indian master Shantarakshita (8th century), the abbot of the glorious Nalanda Monastery to Tibet, to teach and establish a monastic



FIG. 8

One Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara
Tibet; 14th-15th century
Pigments on cloth; 55 x 49¼ in.
(139.7 x 125.95 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.178 (HAR 190)

**FIG. 9**

Shantarkshita (active 8th century)
and Scenes of His Life in Tibet (detail)
Tibet; 19th century
Pigments on cloth; 71¾ x 41¾ in.
(181.289 x 105.092 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2007.22.1 (HAR65798)



tradition (FIG. 9). According to mythologized accounts, Shantarakshita, with the help of Padmasambhava, who magically subdued indigenous Tibetan gods and converted them to Buddhist faith, oversaw the construction of the first Tibetan Buddhist temple of Samye.

Padmasambhava's life story revealed by his Tibetan disciples tells that after his time in Tibet he departed to the land of flesh-eating demons (*rakshasa*) to subdue them and instruct them in Buddhist teachings. Since then he has dwelled there, in a palace on the Copper-colored Mountain (FIG. 6).

Other important subjects of the itinerant storytellers' repertoire were adaptations of various tales from the stories of the previous lives of the Buddha (*jatakas*) and stories of the virtuous deeds (*avadanas*) as well as original Tibetan romanticized moral narratives.

The story of a beautiful girl called Nangsa Woebum is both a moral tale often performed by *lama manis* and a popular Tibetan opera (FIG. 10).

Nangsa is said to be an emanation of Tara, the deity most beloved by Tibetans. Her life story is set in actual locations in central or western Tibet. The narrative, interspersed with songs, combines authentic elements of Tibetan daily life. An unhappy woman who has been forced into marriage suffers terrible injustice from her husband's family and dies of grief only to be returned to life by the Lord of Death, because of her good karma and to continue her virtuous existence. She then meets a Buddhist teacher, becomes a nun, practices Buddhism, and eventually converts the very people who had done her harm, instilling faith and making them into Buddhist practitioners.

FIG. 10

The Story of Nangsa Woebum
Tibet; ca. 19th century
Pigments on cloth; 51½ x 31½ in.
(130 x 80 cm)
Collection of R.R.E.



CONCLUSION

All the themes of Tibetan narratives and the forms in which they are presented, received, performed, and reproduced explored in the exhibition connect through the subjects of their stories. Some themes, such as those found in legendary lives of the Buddha, rematerialize as part of a narrative about the Tibetan cultural hero, an Indian master involved in Tibet's conversion to Buddhism. This master's life story is closely tied to narratives about Tibetan Buddhist kings and their special relationship to Tibet's patron deity. All of these narratives played an important role in the development of the Tibetans' cultural identity and, in turn, informed their artistic expressions. It is not surprising then to find elements of an ancient Indian morality tale in a popular Tibetan drama, next to themes with inspiring and hopeful outcomes rooted in Tibetan reality. The rich narrative Himalayan traditions are loved in all Tibetan cultural regions. This exhibition hopes to bring these narratives to a shared forum of global storytelling in a continuing effort to relate and create Himalayan narratives.

COVER

Victory over Mara (detail)
Mongolia?, 19th century
Pigments on cloth; 30 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ (78.42 x 64.77 cm)
Rubin Museum of Art
C2006.66.305 (HAR 699)

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