

Educator Resource

Casting the Divine: Sculptures of the Nyingjei Lam Collection

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How to Use This Resource/Glossary	2
<i>Buddha Touching the Earth</i>	4
<i>Tangtong Gyelpo</i>	6
<i>Acala</i>	8
Resources for Further Learning	10

How to Use This Educator Resource

Casting the Divine: Sculptures of the Nyingei Lam Collection showcases exquisite sculptures from the Himalayas and the regions immediately to the south, including works in metal, stone, and bone that have stunning details, inlays of precious materials, and fine inscriptions.

The contents of this Educator Resource are designed to be used by educators and students and can be adapted to suit the needs of a wide range of classrooms. **Included are three key images from the exhibition.** The guiding questions provided with each image are intended to draw attention to details in each painting and to the broad themes of the exhibition. It is always helpful to begin looking at each work of art with some basic, open-ended questions that will elicit observations and questions.

- What’s going on in this sculpture?
- What about this sculpture made you say that?
- Where else have you seen something like this?

We encourage you to use this guide in any way that works best for you:

- Learn about the exhibition as you prepare to bring your students to the Rubin Museum.
- Introduce art from the Himalayas and the main theme of the exhibition to your students.
- Use the guiding questions as a starting point for students to conduct independent research.
- Explore the additional resources to learn more about art from the Himalayas.

Glossary

Sculpture- the art of constructing figures or designs in relief by carving, molding, or casting materials three dimensionally.

Buddhism- a religion and a philosophy that is based on the teachings of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha. The Buddhist tradition focuses on the attainment of the enlightenment and nirvana and release from an endless cycle of death and rebirth.

Buddha- a title given to one who has attained spiritual awakening (enlightenment) in the Buddhist tradition. The term “the Buddha” often refers to Buddha Shakyamuni, also known as Siddhartha Gautana, who lived from approximately 563-483 BCE.

Pose- a particular way of standing or sitting, usually adopted for effect.

Mudra- one of the symbolic hand gestures used in religious images and ceremonies in Buddhist and Hindu cultures.

Idealized- assuming the characteristics of perfection.

Symbol- a word, phrase, image, or the like used for or regarded as representing something else.

Adorned- to decorate or add beauty to an object, usually by ornaments.

Wrathful- marked by or indicative of strong vengeful anger or indignation.

Silk Road: an interconnected network of trade routes that have bridged the Asian and Mediterranean worlds since antiquity

Sage: a profoundly wise person; a person famed for wisdom

Meditate: to engage in deep thought or contemplation; reflect

Nirvana: a release from the cycle of death and rebirth as a result of the extinction of individual passion, hatred, and delusion





Buddha Touching the Earth
Tibet; ca. 15th century
Gilt copper alloy with pigment and semiprecious stones
L2005.9.47 (HAR 68458)

This Buddha sculpture is fully gilded and special emphasis has been placed on his garments. The hem is a flower garland with inset stones and the folds on the shoulder and between the legs are the only areas where the garment has volume.

The Story of the Buddha

Buddhism is based on the teachings of Prince **Siddhartha Gautama**, who was born in India in the 6th century BCE. Buddhism spread through Asia during a time when fresh philosophical and religious ideas were flourishing all along the **Silk Road**.

A **sage** told his father that Prince Siddhartha would one day become either a great ruler or a great teacher. His father groomed Siddhartha to one day rule as king and gave his son everything he desired. As a child, Siddhartha lived a life of luxury and ease within his palace walls.

However at the age of 29 Siddhartha left the palace and saw four things that shook him deeply. He saw an elderly man, sad and bent with age. He also saw a sick man, coughing and pale. Then, he saw a group of mourners at a funeral. Finally, he saw a traveling sage begging for money. He learned that this man had exchanged worldly pleasures in order to seek wisdom.

Siddhartha realized that the world was full of suffering. He decided to leave his life of indulgence and search the world for the true causes of suffering and the means to overcome it. He cut his long hair, removed his heavy jewelry, and spent many years traveling and studying with other sages. However, he did not get any closer to his goal.

Finally, he sat down to **meditate** under a tree and vowed not to move until he discovered how to end suffering. Many days passed and he faced many distractions. Finally, Siddhartha attained an ultimate understanding of suffering and, more importantly, how to defeat it. He had become Buddha, the Enlightened One. He reached down and touched the ground, calling on the earth itself to witness his accomplishment.

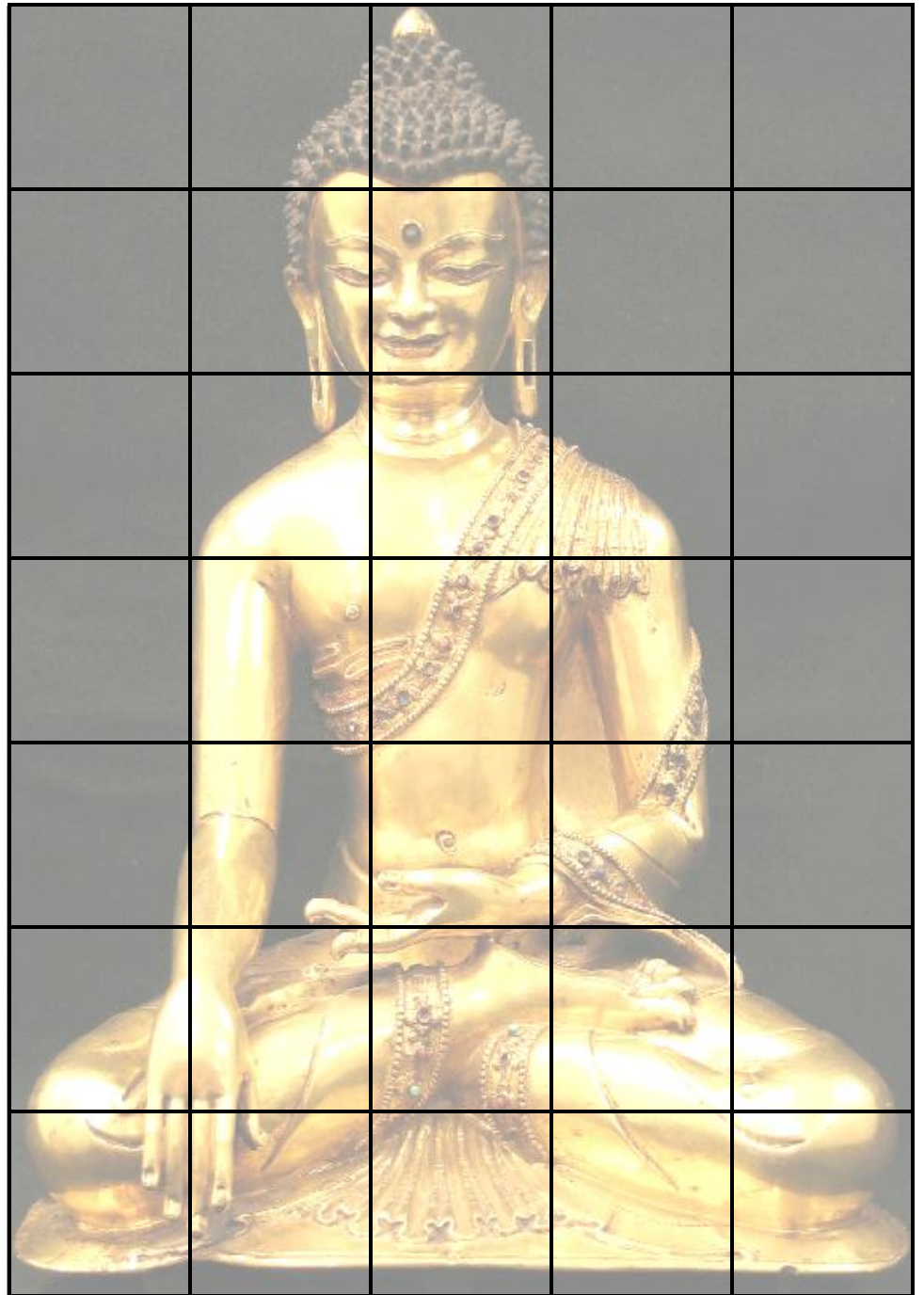
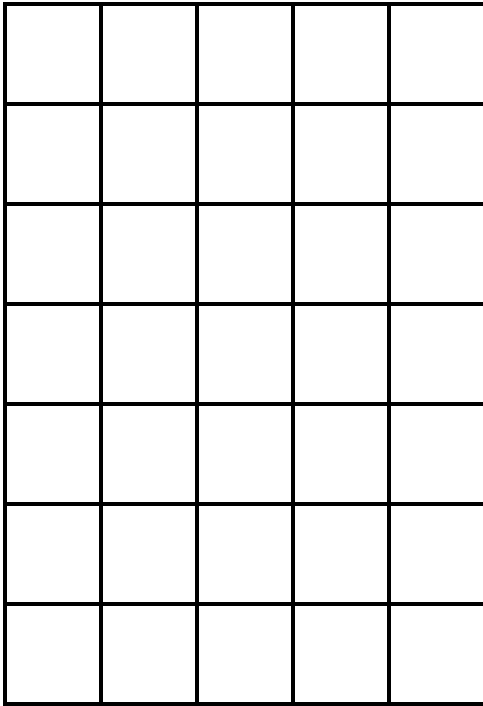
He went on to teach his ideas for many years and gained many followers. The Buddha lived until he was 80 years old. When he died, he reached **nirvana**, a release from the cycle of death and rebirth.

Guiding Questions

1. Take the **pose** of this figure, paying special attention to the positions of the hands and legs. Make a list of words you would use to describe this pose.
2. Sculptures often tell stories through the use of facial expressions, physical attributes, and gestures (called **mudras**). Read the story of **Buddha Shakyamuni** (sometimes referred to as **Siddhartha Gautama**). What sculptural details do you notice that illustrate important elements of the story?
3. The Buddha taught his followers not to be attached to material things, yet this sculpture was made using precious materials. Why do you think this might be?

Drawing Activity

Draw the sculpture in the grids.



How tall is the sculpture in the galleries?
How wide is it?

Key

— = 1 in

□ = 1 in²

Scale 1: 2





Thangtong Gyalpo
Tibet; second half of the 15th century
Copper alloy with pigment
L2005.9.63 (HAR 68496)

This is truly a holy image. Its inscription states that it contains grain that was consecrated by the famed yogin, engineer, craftsmen, and artist Thangtong Gyalpo (1361–1485) that it depicts. Painted with thick layers of gold and blue, the figure appears very much alive, and the richly decorated outer robe is truly remarkable. He holds a medical pill and a vase for the promotion of long life.

The subject of this portrait is the Tibetan mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo, renowned engineer and bridge builder. He is reputed to have enjoyed a long life and although his exact dates are uncertain, two sets are generally attributed to him: 1361–1485 and 1385–1481. Thangtong Gyalpo inadvertently began a career in engineering when he was refused a ferry passage on the grounds of his eccentric appearance. Because of this experience he subsequently embarked on a campaign to build bridges and along with other ferry crossings. His first endeavor was in 1430 at the Chusul River where, with the assistance of two blacksmiths, he forged iron—said to be “the thickness of an eight-year-old boy’s arm”—into chain links, with which he attempted to span the river. Thangtong Gyalpo and his troupe of seven beautiful sisters then toured Tibet, raising money to construct a reputed fifty-eight iron chain bridges and a hundred and eight ferry-crossing stations. The eccentric appearance that led to the inception of Thangtong Gyalpo’s engineering career is evident in this portrait: hair disarranged in a thick pile on top of his head, a wide flat nose, a goatee and a full walrus moustache. His body is said to have been of a dark brown colour, described in some sources as having the hue of “wet liver.” This observed characteristic of Thangtong Gyalpo’s appearance may have influenced the choice of metal used to make this image. His exotic robe suggests a sumptuous Chinese embroidered fabric or cut velvet, and consists of lobed cartouches of rabbits and phoenix against a flower-filled ground.

Guiding Questions

1. This is a portrait of a historical figure, rather than an **idealized** image. What are some of his unique distinguishing characteristics?
2. Look carefully at what the figure is holding and wearing. What can you guess about him based on these **symbols**?
3. This sculpture of a great teacher was made by his own students during his lifetime. Why do you think they might have done this?





Acala
Tibet; late 13th–14th century
Copper alloy with silver, copper, and pigment
L2005.9.27 (HAR 68452)

This wonderful image of Acala, the “Immovable,” represents early Tibetan sculpture at its most distinctive. His head and hair knot are huge and the pedestal he stands upon is extremely slim and high. Unusual details include the large cobra in his headdress along with the other snakes that make up his jewelry. The deity brandishes a sword and holds a noose in a threatening mudra (*tarjani mudra*). He stands upon two figures, the elephant-headed god Ganapati and possibly the Hindu god Isana. Above in the deities crown is believed to be Aksobhya, the Buddha who resides over the family of deities.

Acala is usually invoked by followers of the Buddhist traditions to overcome demons who cause diseases, one’s own negative mental thoughts or obstacles when in the pursuit of enlightenment. This sculpture also shows the artistic similarities of eastern Indian artist traditions adopted by Tibetan artists.

Guiding Questions

1. Take the pose of this figure, paying special attention to the positions of the hands and legs. Make a list of words you would use to describe this pose.
2. In his hands, Acala holds a sword and lasso, and his body is adorned with snakes. What emotions do you think this sculpture is trying to evoke?
3. Although they look fearful, wrathful deities like Acala are protectors: forces of good. Why do you think that Acala and other wrathful deities are portrayed like this?

Resources for Further Learning

Web Resources

www.rmanyc.org/castingthedivine

Casting the Divine: Sculptures of the Nyingjei Lam Collection // Explore exhibition resources to further discover some of the museum's jewels from the Himalayas.

www.rmanyc.org/education

Rubin Museum of Art // Explore multimedia resources and videos. Find out about current and upcoming exhibition and programs at the Rubin Museum of Art.

www.rmanyc.org/schoolprograms

School Programs: Rubin Museum of Art // Browse and learn about the different programs the museum has to offer for students K–12.

www.rmanyc.org/universities

Universities: Rubin Museum of Art // Learn how you can use the museum, our collections, and online resources as an extension of the classroom.

www.himalayanart.org

Himalayan Art Resources // Search a virtual museum of documented Himalayan art that includes high-resolution images, essays, articles, thematic collections, bibliographies, and activities for children.

www.tibetanlineages.org

Treasury of Lives: Biographies of Himalayan Buddhist Masters // Browse biographies and portraits of Tibetan Buddhist and Bon masters by religious tradition, geography, community, and historic period.

<http://interactive.rma2.org/>

Educational Interactive Library // Journey behind works of Himalayan art on this interactive site, revealing the stories, ideas and beliefs that inspired them.

Readings

Weldon, David, Singer, Jane Casey. *The Sculptural Heritage of Tibet: Buddhist Art in the Nyingjei Lam Collection*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 1999

McArthur, Meher. *Reading Buddhist Art: an Illustrated Guide to Buddhist Signs and Symbols*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2002

Leidy, Denise Patry. *The Art of Buddhism: An Introduction to its History and Meaning*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2008

Menzies, Jackie, ed. *Buddha: Radiant Awakening*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2001