

## ***Educator Resource***

### ***Flip Side: The Unseen in Tibetan Art***

March 15, 2013-February 10, 2014



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## How to Use This Educator Resource

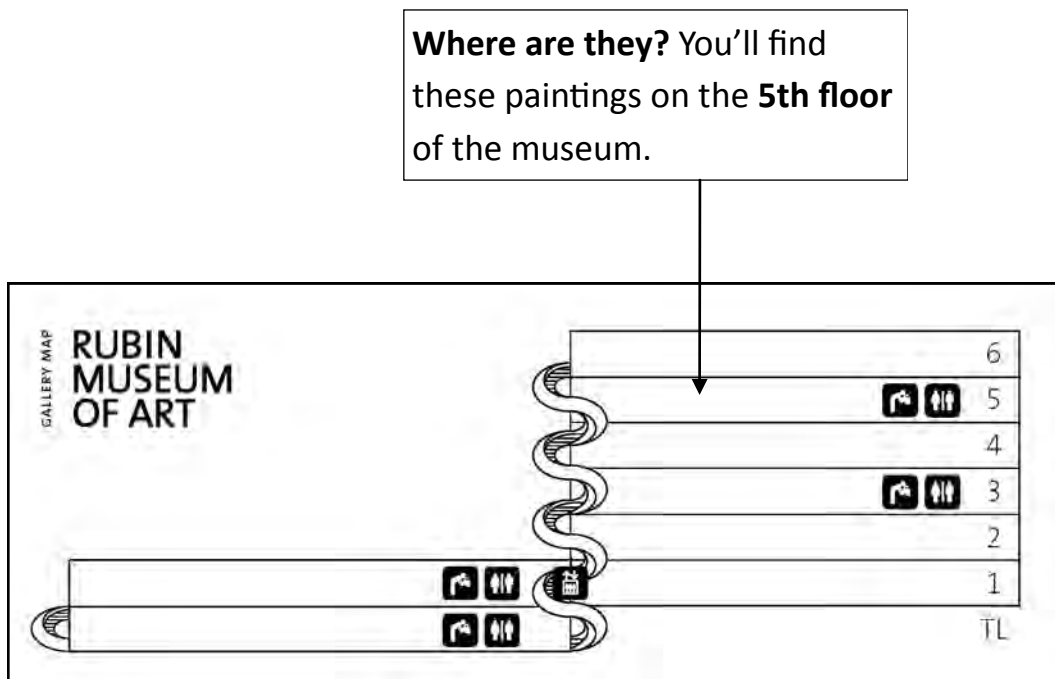
*The Flip Side: The Unseen in Tibetan Art* explores the texts and images on the back of Tibetan art objects which reveal clues to their meaning, function, and historical context. For the first time ever both sides of a select group of scroll paintings (**thangkas**), sculptures, and initiation cards are explored in detail.

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 painting?
- What about this painting 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.



## Key Exhibition Themes

### Mantras

Mantras are widely used in Hindu and Buddhist ritual practice and can be spells that perform specific functions, veneration formulas, or evocations of deities. These texts range from single syllables, called seed syllables, to elaborate combinations, each imbued with specific powers. This power is released through the correct pronunciation of the mantra. Thus throughout the Buddhist world mantras are spoken in their original Sanskrit language, albeit often transformed through transliteration into another language. Mantras of deities are understood as representing the speech form of the deity as well as their speech sphere of action.

If the back of an object is being used for sacred texts and images, the purification mantra *om a hum* is invariably represented. This text is typically aligned with the figures on the front of the work, with its three syllables drawn at the forehead, neck, and heart respectively. The mantra is thus written vertically or in the direction the deity is represented on the front. The purpose of this mantra is to purify the materials through which the figure is represented.

#### Mantra Examples

*ōṃ ā hūṃ*

The three-syllable purification mantra representing body, speech, and mind.

*ōṃ maṇi padme hūṃ (hṛī)*

The syllables *om* and *hum* often begin and end a mantra, and *mani* and *padme* are the specific elements that, meaning jewel and lotus respectively, refer to a deity. This six-syllable mantra is that of Shadakshara-Lokeshvara, the most popular form of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

*ōṃ ā na mo ghu ru rad na badzra ra dza hūṃ*

*ōṃ ā namo gururatnavajrarāja hūṃ*

“*om* veneration to the teacher jewel Vajraraja *hum*”

Again *om*, *a*, and *hum* form the beginning and end, but the middle now contains a veneration formula dedicated to a particular historical personage, in this case Phagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170), whose name is referenced in Sanskrit translation as Vajraraja.

*ōṃ su pra tiṣṭha badzra ye svā hā*

*ōṃ supraṭiṣṭha-vajraye svāhā*

“*om* firmly well-established *svaha*”

This mantra requests that the essence of the deity depicted in a work of art firmly abides in the object as long as the *samsara* remains.

## Consecration Verse

The Consecration Verse, better known as the Verse of Dependent Origination, has been ubiquitous in esoteric Buddhism from its earliest appearance in Buddhist canonical literature to the present. The verse references the very core of the Buddha's teachings, the Four Noble Truths: the suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path to the cessation of suffering. The verse thus is understood as containing the entirety of the Buddha's teachings. As such it is recognized to have consecratory power and is used for this purpose on or in relation to works of art.

The practice of writing this verse in the vicinity or directly on works of art is already documented in India, most frequently in northeastern Indian art. In Tibetan art, this verse is invariably present whenever there is a more elaborate text on the back of an object. While it is always represented in the original Sanskrit language, the verse can be written in a variety of scripts, including Indian-derived scripts and transcriptions of the Sanskrit in Tibetan scripts.

Tibetan Transliteration:

ཡི་རྩ་ལྷན་ཏི་རུ་པ་སྣ་ལྷན་ཏི་རུ་ཆེ་ལྷན་སྣ་ག་ཏི་བྱ་བ་དངོ།

ཏི་ལྷན་ཡི་ནི་རྣམ་ཞི་བ་སྣ་དེ་མ་རྣམ་པ་མཆེ།

Romanized Sanskrit Text:

*ye dharmā hetuprabhavā hetuṃ teśāṃ tathāgato hy avadat  
teśāṃ ca yo nirodha evaṃ vādi mahāśramaṇaḥ*

Translation:

*The tathāgata has stated the causes as well as the cessation  
of the situations (dharma) that arise from causes;  
this is what the great ascetic proclaims.*

# Stupa

Many Tibetan works of art have a stupa represented on their backs, usually taking up most of their surface. Stupas originally derived from the funerary monuments built for the relics of the Buddha but later became the ubiquitous architectural symbol of the Buddhist teaching, and thus the presence of Buddhism, throughout the Buddhist world. In Tibetan the stupa is called a *chorten*, or a “support for veneration,” and besides the merit accrued from its construction a primary purpose is to provide a focus for devotion.

On the backs of works of art the stupa represents the mind and the absolute nature of the Buddha, as well as Buddhist teachings in general. Together the figurative representation on the front of the work; his or her mantra, usually written within the body of a stupa on the back of the figure; and the stupa itself represent the body, speech, and mind forms of the deity or teacher, respectively.



*An example of a Stupa*

## Forbearance Verse

If there is extensive writing on the back of a scroll painting, the Consecration Verse written in Sanskrit is complemented by a verse in Tibetan called the Forbearance Verse. This verse stems from the final portion of the Pratimokshasutra, the text that contains the rules (*vinaya*) for the monastic community (*sangha*).

The use of the Tibetan language, as opposed to Sanskrit, to inscribe this verse on works of art indicates that it has no direct precedence in India, as does the Consecration Verse. Instead its use in this way can so far only be traced back to Phagmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170), the prominent twelfth-century scholar depicted in a painting in this exhibition, and one of his consecration manuals. In the context of the back of a painting, the text may not only be a reminder to Buddhist practitioners to have forbearance but also a request to the deity featured to forgive mistakes in the depiction, the associated mantras, and the consecration ritual.

### Tibetan Text

།བཟོད་པ་དཀའ་ལྷུང་དམ་པ་བཟོད་པ་ནི། །སྤང་ན་འདས་པ་མཚོག་ཅིས་སངས་རྒྱས་གསུང།

།རབ་དུ་བྱུང་བ་གཞན་ལ་གནོད་པ་དང། །གཞན་ལ་འཚོ་བ་དགོ་སྤོང་མ་ཡིན་ནོ།

### Romanized Tibetan Text:

*zopa kathub dampo zodpa ni | nyangen depa chog che sanggye sung |*

*rabtu chungwa zhenla nopa dang | zhen la tsewa gechong ma yinno |*

### Translation

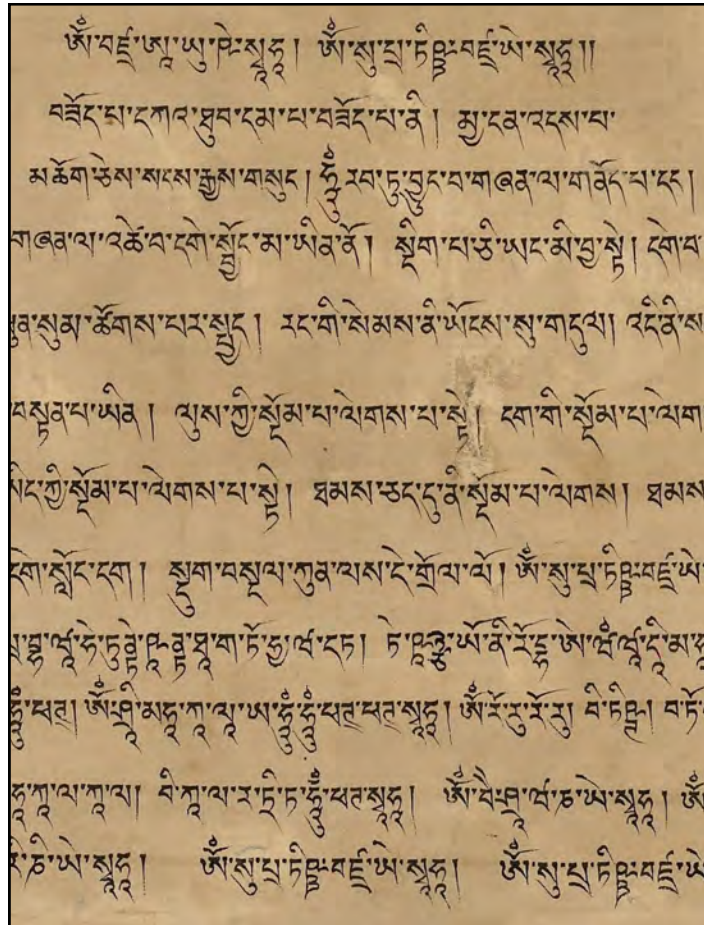
*Forbearance is supreme ascetic practice, forbearance is  
supreme nirvana, say the Buddha.  
The renunciate who harms another and who injures another is no monk  
(shramana)*



## Languages and Scripts

Texts on the flip side of art are written in a variety of languages and scripts. In general the Sanskrit language is used for the mantras and the consecration verse, while the remaining texts are in Tibetan.

Sanskrit is written in a variety of scripts that fall into two main groups, those deriving from Indic scripts and those deriving from Tibetan scripts. Popular Indian-derived scripts are Lantsa—a variant of the Ranjana script developed in eleventh-century Nepal—and Wartula, both represented in this exhibition. Tibetan scripts are varied and range from the Uchen, or “headed,” script that is most common in printing to the Ume, or “headless,” cursive scripts, some of which are more calligraphic than others. The most cursive script is called Khyugyig, or Rapid Script. In religious texts Tibetan scripts are also used to transliterate texts in Sanskrit. In this case they have an extended set of characters.



*Tibetan Script on the back of a painting*



## Eleventh Abbot of Ngor, Sanggye Sengge

Ngor Monastery, Southern-central Tibet;

1580s-1590s

Pigments on Cloth

Rubin Museum of Art

F1996.21.1 (HAR 493)

Dimensions: 30 1/2 x 26 1/4 in.

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### FRONT

In the center of this painting the scholar and eleventh abbot of Ngor Monastery, Sanggye Sengge (1504–1569), performs the argumentation gesture (vitarkamudra) and holds a golden vase of longevity. This thangka is part of a set distributed across many collections and depicts the transmission lineage of the “Path with the Fruit” teachings within the Ngor School of Tibetan Buddhism. The subject of this painting, however, is the teaching transmission of a specific form of the deity Chakrasamvara, Demchog Kandro Gyatso. The identity of the teacher and the transmission this painting illustrates are both revealed by the inscription along the bottom border.

### BACK

The back of this work reflects the neat arrangement of the figures on the front, with the a purification mantra written in the position of each figure. The longer text in the center combines mantras and prayers taken from the Pratimokshasutra and is framed by the repeated use of the mantra requesting the essence of the deities to abide in the painting. A mantra at the beginning of the sequence refers to the prominent depiction of Buddha Amitayus on the front, while the deities evoked toward the end of the text—protector and wealth deities such as Mahakala, Vaishravana, Jambhala, and Vasudhara—are not depicted.

### Guiding Questions

1. The main figure in this **thangka** is a Buddhist teacher, the Eleventh **Abbot** of Ngor **Monastery**. The figures around him represent his **lineage**, or teaching tradition. *Why do you think it might be important to represent where teachings come from in a painting?*
2. The figures in this thangka come from different geographic regions around Himalayan Asia. *Focus on any of the three figures and see what observations you can gather based on the way that they are represented (i.e. clothing, attributes, gestures, etc)*
3. **Mantras**, or prayers, on the back of this thangka relate directly to the figures represented on the front side and make this thangka a sacred Buddhist object. *Why do you think these mantras are on the back where they are not usually visible or seen?*











### White Tara with Long Life Deities

Eastern Tibet; 19th century

Pigments on cloth

F1996.32.5 (HAR 542)

Dimensions: 26 3/4 x 17 1/2 in.

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#### FRONT

This painting of White Tara is almost exclusively dedicated to longevity. The main deity and the top triad—a seated white form and a standing red form of the Buddha Amitayus and the goddess Ushnishavijaya, white with three faces and eight hands—are all the focus of Buddhist practices for the purpose of longevity. The central Tara is flanked by the yellow Marichi and the fierce blue Ekajati, both of them holding the fly whisk of an attendant. At the bottom center Green Tara sits sideways clasping the stems of two blue lilies in her hands, her compassionate posture indicating her willingness to help in emergencies.

#### BACK

With a stupa, a mandala drawn in its dome, and the handprints of a high Buddhist master, the back of this painting is extremely rich in content. Note in particular the additional mantras written in gold onto the stupa's body. As the bottom inscription states, this painting was commissioned by Yeshe Lobzang Tanpa, likely the Eighth Tatsag Rinpoche (1760–1810), and the merit of its making is dedicated to eliminating the suffering of untimely death of all sentient beings and bestowing the blessings of long life. If this identification is right, the handprints and the small seal prints underneath them may be those of that teacher.

#### Guiding Questions

1. **White Tara**, the main figure in this thangka, is a deity of long life, **compassion**, and peace. *What aspects of her environment reflect these qualities?*
2. White Tara's pose and the arrangement of figures on the front of the thangka mirror the shape of a **stupa**, a symbol of Buddhist teachings. *Look at the images of the front and the back, side by side. How do you think the stupa represented on the back relates to the White Tara and attendants on the front of the thangka?*
3. This painting may have been **commissioned** by a Buddhist master, Yeshe Lobzang Tanpa, the Eighth Tatsag Rinpoche (1760–1810), whose handprints and **seal** you can see on the back. *Why do you think it was important for him to leave his mark on this painting?*











**Revered Nyingmapa Hierarch**  
Tibet (Nyingma School); 18th century  
Pigments on cloth  
C2001.3.5 (HAR 65011)  
Dimensions: 13 1/2 x 9 1/4 in.

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## FRONT

In the center of this painting a still-unidentified but revered Nyingma School hierarch sits on a richly decorated lion throne. His hands, holding a **vajra** and **bell**, are crossed in front of his chest, symbolizing the overcoming of the duality of wisdom and method, and thus emphasizing the high spiritual achievements of the teacher. Buddha Samantabhadra above him and Vajrasattva in the upper-left corner have the same attributes, and in the top-right corner is Padmasambhava. At the bottom of the painting, Legden Mahakala is flanked by White Jambhala riding a dragon and a protective goddess, possibly Ekajati.

## BACK

The revered nature of the teacher depicted on the front is emphasized here in a highly unusual way. Defying logic and expectations, the back of the teacher is shown seated on the same elaborate throne as on the front. Before the throne is a table of ritual implements, which charmingly now mirror the arrangement on the table on the front. In this painting, the teacher is thus revered from both sides.

## Guiding Questions

1. This figure in the painting has not been identified, but he is shown as a highly revered teacher. *What elements of this painting show that this is an important teacher?*
2. On the front side, the table before the main figure holds **ritual objects** and **offerings**. *Compare this with the way that the same table is represented on the flip side of the thangka. What do you notice?*
3. Compared to the flip sides of the other paintings (see previously paintings in this guide) which contain **consecration** mantras and/or marks of important teachers, the flip side of this painting actually shows the back of the figure himself. *Why do you think that it was made that way?*









## Resources for Further Learning

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### **Web Resources**

[www.rmanyc.org/flipside](http://www.rmanyc.org/flipside)

**Flip Side: The Unseen in Tibetan Art** // Explore exhibition resources and to learn further about texts and images on the back of Tibetan art objects.

[www.rmanyc.org/education](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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**

Beers, Robert. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2003

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

Jackson, David, *Mirror of the Buddha : Early Portraits from Tibet*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2012

Fernie, Eric. *Art History and its Methods: A critical anthology*. London: Phaidon, 1995, p. 361

## **Glossary**

*A list of terms used in this resource and their definitions.*

**Abbot-** a title given to the head of a monastery in various religious traditions

**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.

**Compassion-** the act of sympathetic concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others

**Commission-** a formal agreement granting the authority to create certain works of art

**Consecration-** the act of dedication to the service and worship of a deity.

**Himalayas-** a mountain range in Asia separating the plains of India from the Tibetan Plateau and is home to some of the world's highest peaks.

**Lineage-** a line of descendants of a particular family, school, or religion.

**Mantras-** religious words or sound repeated to aid concentration in meditation and for the acquisition of merit.

**Monastery-** a community of people bound by vows to a religious life

**Offerings-** gifts or contributions for religious purposes.

**Ritual Objects-** objects used in a ritual or a religious ceremony.

**Seal-** a mark or symbol attached to a document or work of art confirming its authorization.

**Stupa-** a dome-shaped Buddhist shrine.

**Thangka-** Tibetan scroll paintings on cloth that often represent Buddhist deities or mandalas and can be rolled up and easily transported.

**White Tara-** a female deity and goddess for the benefit of all beings.