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**THE
RUBIN**

**MUSEUM
OF
ART**

PRESS RELEASE

THE RUBIN ANNOUNCES COLLECTION UPDATES:

**A CIRCA 16TH-CENTURY MASK OF BHAIRAVA IS
RETURNED TO NEPAL**

**LINDA COLET JOINS IN NEWLY CREATED ROLE OF
HEAD OF COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT AND PROVENANCE
RESEARCH**



*Bhairava; Nepal; ca. 16th century; gilt copper alloy;
28 x 27 1/4 x 19 in.; image courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Art*

NEW YORK, NY, December 4, 2023 – The Rubin Museum of Art has returned a circa 16th-century mask of the deity Bhairava to Nepal after receiving new evidence concerning its provenance. The return ceremony took place at the Manhattan District Attorney’s office on December 4, 2023, and included three additional works from other collections. Acting Consul General Mr. Bishnu Prasad Gautam received the object on behalf of the Government of Nepal.

In September 2022, social media posts and news coverage suggested the mask was stolen from a site in Dolakha in the 1990s. Per the Museum’s process, the Rubin immediately placed the work under review with its Collections team as well as independent researchers. Public signage was also placed in the galleries acknowledging this process.

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Additionally, the Rubin reached out to the Consulate General of Nepal in New York to request support from the Government of Nepal in locating additional information pertaining to the circumstances and documentation of the reported theft.

In March 2023, the Manhattan District Attorney's office shared with the Rubin corroborating evidence that the mask was stolen from a site in Dolakha in March 1994. Upon review of this documentation, the Rubin deaccessioned the work, and on March 16, 2023, voluntarily agreed to turn the work over to the DA's office to facilitate the return to its lawful owner.

The Rubin acquired the mask in 2005, and there was no evidence of theft or unlawful removal from Nepal at the time of acquisition until evidence was provided by the Manhattan District Attorney's office. Prior to the Rubin's acquisition, the work had been transacted on the art market, including a public auction at Sotheby's in 1996.

"While we have treasured this exceptional mask and enjoyed sharing it with visitors in our galleries since 2005 as well as through several scholarly publications, the evidence presented is clear, as is our decision to return the work to Nepal. We're deeply sorry for the loss its removal has caused community members in Dolakha. We hope the work can return to its former location, yet also understand that the return will not remedy the wrongs that were done," states Jorrit Britschgi, Executive Director of the Rubin Museum of Art. "The Rubin is a responsible actor and carefully considers any claims regarding works in our collection, most recently demonstrated in spring 2022 with the return of two objects to Nepal—one of which resulted in a partnership with the Itumbaha monastery in Kathmandu to support its effort of establishing an onsite museum for the study and display of their collection, which opened this past summer. Such projects are a reflection of our commitment to the Himalayan region and its cultural heritage."

The Rubin is opposed to looting and believes that collecting activities should adhere to the highest standards of ethical and professional practice. If the Rubin learns, through its own research or by another party, that objects in its collection are claimed to have been stolen, looted, or illegally excavated, the Rubin immediately addresses these claims carefully and seriously and works collaboratively with the relevant authorities in the United States and the Himalayan region.

The Rubin has committed additional resources to provenance research to detail the history of its collection and announces the appointment of **Linda Colet** as the new Head of Collections Management and Provenance Research. In this new position reporting to Director of Curatorial Administration and Collections, Colet will manage a team responsible for collection management, registration, conservation, art installation and logistics, and will oversee all provenance research efforts. These efforts will continue to rely on the engagement of outside experts who can shed light on the history of the objects.

"I am honored to join the Rubin Museum of Art as Head of Collections and Provenance Research. I have deep respect for the mission of the Rubin, the quality of the collection, and the well-respected colleagues that I look forward to working closely with. This is my new museum home, and I look forward to contributing to its success," says Colet.

Colet joins the Rubin today with over 20 years of collections management experience with expertise in provenance research, digitization workflows, and streamlining collections policies and procedures within a museum environment. She has worked with renowned institutions

such as the Smithsonian, Museum of Modern Art, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as George Washington University Special Collection Libraries, Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture, and the Sikorsky Archives. She holds a BA and MA in art history from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Hunter College, City University of New York, teaches as an adjunct art history faculty, and serves as a peer advisor assessing collections management practices across the museum space for the American Alliance of Museums.

NOTES TO THE EDITOR

The large mask displays iconographic features of Bhairava such as the third eye, the crown decorated with skulls and crawling snakes, and blazing red hair with a crescent moon. Bhairava is the wrathful incarnation of Shiva. This identification correlates with medieval-period Newar inscriptions that refer to such masks as Akasa Bhairava, Sky Bhairava.

The back of the mask is concave to hold a round earthen pot. During an annual festival called Indraajatra, celebrated all over the Kathmandu Valley, a bamboo pipe that runs through the mouth of the mask connects to the pot's contents, a rice beer called *thvam*. The beer is ritually distributed to devotees as the blessings of Hatha Dya or Divine Ancestor god, who is responsible for making seasonal rain. The autumnal festival is a thanksgiving rite to honor him.

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

The Rubin Museum of Art in Chelsea, New York City, explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas across history and into the present. With its globally renowned collection, centered largely around art from the Tibetan Plateau, the Rubin fosters understanding and appreciation of the art by interpreting and relating it to our shared human experience today. Inspired by the tenets of Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous religions, and aligned with ongoing research into learning, behavior, and the brain, the Rubin offers innovative exhibitions and programs that examine provocative ideas across the arts and explore the mind. Through this work, the Museum serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation, opening windows to inner worlds so visitors can better navigate outer ones. rubinmuseum.org

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