

# Synopsis of the Exhibit: “*Dharma and Puṇya*: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal”

Holy Cross Cantor Gallery, September 4 -December 20, 2019

Roger Hankins, Gallery Director

Co-Curators: Jinah Kim, Harvard University, and Todd Lewis, College of the Holy Cross

“*Dharma and Puṇya*: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal” will locate Nepal’s artistic heritage in the larger Himalayan and Indic culture zones; it will highlight its aesthetic accomplishments, regional importance, and historical significance in demonstrating the centrality of ritual practices in the living reality of Buddhist traditions. “Nepal,” traditionally designating the Kathmandu Valley, has been the homeland of an ethnic group called the Newars, whose culture has been celebrated as among the richest and most complex in Asia. Nepal is at times discussed as an in-between, or a highly creative liminal space between the Indic sub-continent and the Tibetan cultural region. This exhibition will bring special awareness to the unparalleled contributions of Newar artisans and patrons not only to the subsequent development of the Himalayan art (especially in central Tibet) but also to Indian art and the diaspora of Buddhist art across Asia to China.

As the title suggests, this exhibition will shed light on the agency of people – patrons, ritual specialists, devotees -- in creating and amplifying the efficacy of sacred artistic productions that are instrumental in expressing and recording religious observances. To this end, we juxtapose ritual objects with what is usually collected in the West as “fine art objects” (like scroll paintings, painted manuscripts, repoussé icons, or gilded images). Nepalese “*paubhas*” (the term for hanging paintings), *bilampau* (banners hung in monastic courtyards) and manuscripts will be prominent. Significantly, these items from Nepal often include depictions of ritual scenes and donor families, are frequently accompanied by colophons containing historical records of initial donations. These paintings also depict scenes from popular narratives that contain accounts of local saints and the sacralization of regional geography.

Because the Cantor Gallery is uniquely situated in a college setting, and in a city (Worcester, Massachusetts) that is now home to thousands of refugees from Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan, we plan on bringing artists and ritual specialists from Nepal to the gallery for a series of co-curricular programs to make the objects truly come to life. We intend to display a huge banner painting recounting Kathmandu Valley Buddhist narratives by creating its display context in Nepal: under the eaves of a pagoda temple roof, on a wall looking out upon a monastic courtyard. Many scenes from this extraordinary painting will resonate with ritual objects displayed. We will also have touch-screen displays that will allow the visitors to interact and use centuries-old manuscripts on display virtually through flipping the folios on digital screens. We also plan to have leading artists and priests come from Nepal to demonstrate their crafts (repoussé, painting, wood carving) and enact major Newar Buddhist ritual traditions: the rite imparting divine presence to images and paintings as part of in the creative artistic process; the ritual that accompanies the completion and implants “life” into a sacred icon, painting in the eyes; the practice of groups using molds to make small *stūpas*, a common scene depicted in paintings commissioned to celebrate the completion of 100,000 objects; commissioning a repoussé icon for the elder rite of passage called *buda jamko* to celebrate someone reaching 77 years, 7 months of age; the tradition of inserting paintings into canonical Sanskrit texts, done for both worship and recitation.

Most of these art genres and ritual practices we will highlight originated in ancient Buddhist India, but are still extant traditions in the Kathmandu Valley. The works displayed in conjunction with short video clips showing their use in Nepal, as well as with co-curricular demonstrations (that will invite public participation), will impart important insights about the nature of Buddhism and the Buddhist experience – in South Asia and everywhere – as a community reality expressed through ritual traditions. The purpose of the exhibition’s juxtapositions is *not* to claim timelessness of Nepali art and ritual but to make students and the public at large aware of the ritual context and deeply religious nature of many Nepalese objects that are collected in the West. Often grand objects (like a monumental scroll painting; a wooden mask) were prepared for a community’s use, and it is essential that the public be attuned to their communal, religious, and historical values. The exhibit “*Dharma and Puṇya*: Buddhist Ritual Art of Nepal” will draw attention to an often-overlooked but still vibrant Asian artist tradition; it will also challenge a common misunderstanding about Buddhism in the West, i.e. that it is “just a philosophy” or only constituted for an elite actively seeking *nirvāṇa*. This call for appreciation and awareness is also timely given the outflow of displaced objects that has transpired following the destruction of many homes and community buildings during the disastrous earthquake in 2015.

