

Educator Resource

Mirror of the Buddha: Early Portraits from Tibet

October 21, 2011–March 5, 2012



**RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART**

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How to Use This Educator Resource

In early Tibetan painted portraits, founding masters of important Buddhist schools were often represented as holy personages and exalted to the level of buddhas. The exhibition *Mirror of the Buddha* showcases some of these early portraits. Identification of these figures is complicated and often requires analysis of written inscriptions and lineages. This exhibition presents particular figures within the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. We recommend visiting www.rmanyc.org/mirrorofthebuddha and downloading the “Schools of Tibetan Buddhism” as an additional resource to this guide.

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/sculpture?
- What about this painting/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 Himalayan art 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 Himalayan art.

Glossary

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 Gautanna), who lived from approximately 563–483 BCE.

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

Eight Auspicious Symbols - a group of symbols often found in Buddhist art, representing a range of abstract concepts. These significant symbols are the doublefish, parasol, conch shell, lotus blossom, banner of victory, vase of sacred water, wheel of life/teaching, and knot of eternity.

idealized - a conception of something that is perfect, especially that which one seeks to attain.

lama - the Tibetan word for teacher.

Karmapa - the Head of the Kagyu School of Buddhism through the Karma Kagyu lineage and often respected as a living buddha.

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

mudra - a symbolic ritual hand gesture or arm position.





Phagmotrupa with His Previous Lives and Episodes from His Career
Tibet; 13th century
Distemper on cotton
Rubin Museum of Art
C2005.16.38 (HAR 65461)

This painting is a perfect example (and prototype) of standard early portraits of Phagmotrupa within the Taklung Kagyu School. It depicts Phagmotrupa surrounded by minor figures, including tantric deities in the top register, and scenes of his previous lives in the right and left columns. While several later copies of this prototype survive, early versions of this portrait, such as this, are rare.

The original upon which this painting was based was presumably commissioned by one of Phagmotrupa's disciples either in the last twelve years of the teacher's life or in the decade or two following his death. The prototype was probably made early in the lifetime of the Taklung School founder, Taklungthangpa, who was an intimate disciple of Phagmotrupa. Taklungthangpa was told privately by Phagmotrupa the stories of his previous lives that are depicted in the columns of this painting.

Guiding Questions

- 1) Portraits of Buddhist teachers are both realistic and **idealized**. In your opinion, which parts of this portrait seem realistic and which seem idealized?
- 2) The smaller scenes on either side of the central figure are scenes from his past lives. Why might these be included in his portrait?
- 3) Explore an image of the historical Buddha by visiting the resource site www.himalyanart.org and entering the number 501 into the search box (Buddha Shakyamuni/HAR 501). How does this painting of Phagmotrupa compare to the depiction of Buddha Shakyamuni?





Early Karmapa with Footprints
Central Tibet; late 12th century
Dyes or thin washes of pigments on silk
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.32.2 (HAR 508)

This votive painting belongs to the Karma Kagyu School, judging by the special black hat that its main figure wears. It exemplifies the simplest and probably earliest-known painting of a founding master of that school, or Karmapa. It pays homage to the black-hatted master shown above the footprints, who is presumably the First Karmapa, Dusum Khyenpa (1110–1193).

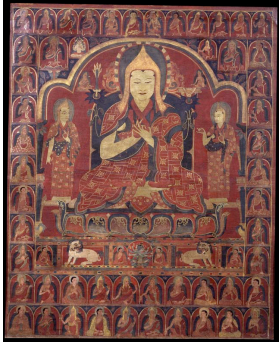
The painting was simply executed with thin washes of color on silk, so it lacks most of the expected features of a fully colored painting. Still it exemplifies devotional paintings of the late twelfth century, based again on worship of the lama's footprints.

The painting also pays respect to the master by depicting him under a broad parasol and surrounded by auspicious objects placed within the undulating vine that grows from below. The parasol is an ancient Indian Buddhist iconographic element of depictions of the Buddha and a way of auspiciously paying homage.

Guiding Questions

- 1) What are the different ways this **Karmapa** is represented in this painting?
- 2) For nearly five hundred years, early Buddhist art used a pair of footprints as a symbol to represent the Buddha. Why might these two footprints be used here?
- 3) This painting incorporates the **Eight Auspicious Symbols**. Can you identify them? Where else have you seen them?





Tsongkhapa with Two Kadam Lineages
Tibet; ca. 1420–1460
Distemper on cotton
Rubin Museum of Art
F1997.31.14 (HAR 595)

This painting portrays the great teacher Tsongkhapa, wearing his usual pointed yellow hat, with his two main Kadam lineages. The painting may date to the mid-fifteenth century, within a generation or two of its subject's life.

It includes such traditional stylistic elements as Nepalese scrollwork, which beautifies the dark-blue backrests of smaller figures. The simple three-lobed arch over the main figure and his two disciples, however, evokes a Sharri (an ancient eastern Indian-inspired aesthetic) atmosphere. The prominent head nimbus of the main figure, depicted as an ancient halolike feature, is borrowed from the early Kadam tradition, artistic confirmation that Tsongkhapa was the founder of the “New Kadam Order,” one of the names for the Gelug School.

Guiding Questions

- 1) The central figure, Tsongkhapa, wears a distinctive yellow hat. Who else do you see dressed this way in the painting and why do you think they would be wearing similar hats?
- 2) The hand gestures in Buddhist art are called **mudras** and have specific symbolic meanings; the teacher in this painting has his hands in the shape of a wheel, symbolizing teaching. How might these types of hand gestures be useful for communicating ideas?
- 3) The smaller figures around the border of the painting represent a **lineage** of teachers, lending context and credibility to Tsongkhapa's teachings. Why might that be important to represent?

Resources for Further Learning

Web Resources

www.rmanyc.org/mirror

Mirror of the Buddha // Explore exhibition resources to further explain the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

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.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.

www.exploreart.org

Explore Art // Journey behind works of Himalayan art on this interactive site, revealing the stories, ideas, and beliefs that inspired them. The site also lets visitors consider how peoples of other culture have expressed ideas on similar issues through their own artistic traditions.

Books

Beer, Robert. *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*.

Farber, Don. *Tibetan Buddhist Life*.

Jackson, David. *Mirror of the Buddha: Early Portraits from Tibet*.

Jackson, David. *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting*.

Kapstein, Matthew. *The Tibetans*.

McArthur, Meher. *Reading Buddhist Art*.

Powers, John. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. pg. 136-205