

《Encountering the Buddha: Art and Practice Across Asia》

October 14, 2017 - November 29, 2020

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery

1050 Independence Avenue, SW Washington, DC

Yong Cho*

A visitor walking into the exhibition hall of *Encountering the Buddha: Art and Practice Across Asia* first hears the sound of pilgrims and monks chanting while circumambulating the Ruwanwelisaya Stupa in Sri Lanka. In the corner room near the entrance, different scenes from Stanley J. Staniski's documentary film "The Texture of Practice: Sri Lanka's Great Stupa" are projected on three large screens. Against this unusual backdrop, the visitor encounters Buddhist sculptures and paintings from across Asia, not simply as works of art within a museum context, but as objects that have life, power, and affect.



Opened in conjunction with the newly renovated Freer|Sackler on October 14, 2017, this multisensory exhibition treats visitors to new perspectives on the artistic traditions of Buddhism. The curators Debra Diamond, Robert DeCaroli, and Rebecca Bloom have put together more than two hundred objects from the museum's own collection.¹

Two highly innovative approaches define the goals of the exhibition.

* Ph.D. candidate, Yale University

¹ In a separate publication, the museum has published a catalogue of its Buddhist art collection, which includes the objects displayed in the exhibition and more. See Debra Diamond, *Paths to Perfection: Buddhist Art at the Freer|Sackler* (London: Giles, 2017).

First, instead of simply paying attention to the object's visual elements –stylistic and iconographical features – this exhibition places each of the Buddhist sculptures and paintings primarily in a concrete ritual space. Each caption, in clear prose, introduces the visitor to a wide range of powers that the Buddhist objects offered to the people who made or consumed them in the original context: childbirth, medicinal healing, wealth, pilgrimage, tantric initiations, and Buddhist kingship. In doing so, the exhibition responds to what Bernard Faure, among others, has critiqued as the “modern gaze,” a tendency to aestheticize Buddhist art at the expense of understanding its original context.²

A reconstructed Tibetan Buddhist shrine room transports the visitors to a sacred precinct in the Himalayas. Composed of more than two hundred objects from Alice S. Kandell Collection, a viewer gains a glimpse of the material surrounds that reflect the real space of Buddhist practice. This offers a different sensorial experience than what is possible with a typical museum collection and display. Lamps, incense, rice mandala, books, carpets, ceiling hangings, furniture, paintings, and sculptures dressed in luxury cloths all populate a dark room. The recording of monks chanting sonorously in the background further enriches the experience of encountering the Buddha. The shrine room helps the viewers imagine the original viewing condition and ritual function of the paintings and sculptures displayed elsewhere in the museum.

Second, rather than delving into the art historical tradition of a specific locale, the exhibition highlights the shared visual and material experiences of the people who lived in the wider Buddhist world. To this end, it brings together the traditions of Sri Lanka, Java, Thailand, Cambodia, India, Tibet, Nepal, Central Asia, China, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan in a single space. While celebrating the diversity of artistic forms from different regions of Asia, the primary emphasis lies in understanding the shared experiences among the members of the Buddhist world. For instance, having juxtaposed four Buddha heads from different regions and time periods, the museum label asks the visitors to note the similarities, rather than differences, among them.

While the exhibition does not feature any work of Korean art, Hyecho, the 8th century Korean monk, is featured as the central figure. The routes that he took during his pilgrimage coincide with the network of international connections that the exhibition highlights, and they are marked onto the map displayed in the center of the hall to guide the visitors. An excellent study by Donald Lopez Jr. and a team of scholars from University of Michigan, *Hyecho's Journey: The World of Buddhism*, was published in conjunction with the exhibition.³ During the travels, Hyecho did not master any local language. As

² Bernard Faure, “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no.3 (Spring, 1988), pp. 768-813.

³ Donald Lopez Jr., *Hyecho's Journey: The World of Buddhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Lopez points out, this made his encounters with the wider Buddhist world driven primarily by visuals – a thematic link to the exhibition’s argument about the shared visual language in the Buddhist world.

Multiple digital screens that dot across the exhibition space provide a platform for tactile viewing experience. Two free apps available for download on mobile devices, which expand on the Tibetan Shrine room display and Hyecho’s journey, allow the visitors to explore these topics at a personal pace.

The exhibition is immensely successful in achieving its goals. Its necessarily broad approaches, however, may disorient an average visitor with no background in the study of Buddhism. The visitor does not have a chance to understand neither the diversity nor the historical developments of Buddhism in different parts of Asia. Fortunately, to learn more about this, the visitor has the rest of the museum, where the rich collection of Buddhist art is displayed chronologically and geographically. By the time the visitor arrives at these more traditional galleries, however, his or her perspective on how to look and think about Buddhist art will have been fundamentally transformed, and the imagination, stimulated.