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Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) Takes a Focused Look at Style in Himalayan Art this Spring

Earthly Immortals: Arhats in Tibetan Painting

April 4 – August 18, 2008

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Red, Black, and Gold

May 2 – November 10, 2008

This spring, RMA is pleased to present two exhibitions with a close focus on artistic style. *Earthly Immortals: Arhats in Tibetan Painting*, on view on the sixth floor gallery, looks at this particular genre of painting to show how a distinctly Tibetan visual vocabulary was developed through the absorption of foreign ideas. *Red, Black, and Gold*, opening on May 2 on the fourth floor gallery, explores the style and symbolism of a particular Tibetan painting genre of expressive line drawing on solid ground.

Through more than 40 works of art, *Earthly Immortals: Arhats in Tibetan Painting* shows that Tibet is a culture built on indigenous traditions infused with foreign ideas. By the fourteenth century, Chinese art and luxury goods were pouring into Tibet as a result of political ties with the Mongol emperors of China. This massive influx had a profound effect on the development of Tibetan painting, including the introduction of the Arhat painting genre to Tibet.

Arhats, of which there are 16, are believed to be either the actual disciples of the historical Buddha or later, devout followers of his teachings. The Arhats are honored as fully-realized preservers and transmitters of Buddhist wisdom who, through intensive meditation, have gained supernatural abilities. The conventions of the Arhat genre came to Tibet through Chinese paintings along with other artistic techniques and ideas. Tibetan artists embraced Chinese ideas and combined them with distinct Tibetan innovations, and their high level of skill, sophistication, and creativity is the focal point of *Earthly Immortals: Arhats in Tibetan Painting*.

Red, Black, and Gold looks at a painting style in which imagery created with freely drawn lines is placed on a solid ground of red, black, or gold. The exhibition includes approximately 30

paintings, drawn from RMA's collection. Whereas almost all Tibetan painting is structured using a grid system, passed down through generations of artists, the paintings in *Red, Black, and Gold* were done without using a grid. Lack of the grid system in this painting style is attributed to the use of the solid ground color, which seems to preclude the use of the grid. As a result, lines are drawn entirely by free-hand, resulting in wildly energetic compositions and dramatically expressive imagery, including ethereal landscapes, flying and flowing garments, and leaping flames.

Red, Black, and Gold also explores the significance of these three solid ground colors, used to convey specific emotions. Red is used to express alarm, power, and resolve; black conveys caution, fear, and protection; and gold communicates wonder, wealth, and opulence. These ground colors, combined with the kinetic power of the line imagery, have a strong emotional and psychological impact on viewers of these works of art.

About RMA

RMA houses an esteemed collection of Himalayan art. The paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are drawn from cultures that touch upon the 1,800 mile arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes Iran, India, China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.

The rich cultural legacy of this region, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery. For young and old alike it is an environment in which to encounter the unknown and find meaningful dialogue. It requires actively bringing to bear one's previous experience, looking closely at the material at hand, discriminating carefully, and shaping the imagination. The fundamental aim of the museum is to provide this adventure in learning through art.

Working to foster connections between visitors and the art is RMA's diverse team of knowledgeable and professional guides who are always available on the gallery floors to answer questions, engage in discussions, and help explore the art at any level. The guides work in concert with RMA's ambitious schedule of exhibitions, education, and public programming, designed to provide multiple entryways to delve into Himalayan art.