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***WORKS OF TIBETAN ART ILLUSTRATE DEATH'S
AFTERMATH AT RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART***

Bardo is First of Two Complementary Exhibitions Examining How Death Has Been Viewed

New York, NY—Vivid images of peaceful and wrathful deities in Tibetan art have reminded Tibetan Buddhists of their mortality and prepared them for death for many centuries. A new exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art provides a window into understanding the purposes of these contrasting images and the roles they play in determining which of two paths a soul may take after death.

On view from **February 12** through **September 6, 2010**, *Bardo: Tibetan Art of the Afterlife* comprises rarely seen paintings, sculptures, illuminated manuscript pages of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ritual cards, and other artifacts created principally as tools to instill an awareness of the impermanence of life and to prepare the living for the appearance of serene and searing visions in death's aftermath. Some 63 works of art will be displayed alongside room-size shrines, models, and digital visualizations.

“We all ask what happens after death,” says exhibition organizer Dr. Ramon N. Prats, Senior Curator, Rubin Museum of Art. “These works of art limn a transitional period directly after death—called *bardo*—which Tibetan Buddhists see as a time full of potential for spiritual enlightenment: its outcome brings either attainment of Buddhahood or rebirth in the wheel of existence.” Rebirth, commonly misunderstood by non-Buddhists as inevitable, is an undesirable effect of karmic shortcomings. This exhibition seeks to show how the interpretation of ancient and beautifully crafted visual images plays a central role in the process of the *bardo*.

On View

The first work of art encountered by the visitor to *Bardo* is a portrait of the tantric master Padmasambhava, who in the last part of the eighth century imparted the original teachings of what we now know as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (called the *Bardo Thodrol* in Tibetan). Thought to be sacred, the manuscript that recorded those teachings was kept secret in order to be prophetically discovered in later times by one master predestined to do so by his good karma. This occurred in the second half of the 14th century.

The archetypal deities of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* are depicted faithfully in an extraordinarily detailed painting on cloth (*thangka*) entitled *Assembly of Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of the Bardo Thodrol*, wherein 42 peaceful and 58 wrathful deities are arranged by categories. According to the Tibetan text, these deities and other visions seen by the dead are no more than unconscious projections of the deluded mind. Influenced by individual karma, they appear to the deceased person upon death, as he enters a state lasting a symbolic period of 49 days. “The deceased is exhorted to recognize and remember that these visions have an empty, hence illusory, nature,” says Dr. Prats. Enlightenment is guaranteed when the true nature of these visions is understood.

An exquisite 18th-century *thangka* in *Bardo* suggests what the attainment of nirvana might look like: enveloped in a halo of light against a background of deep blue and emerald green is a stupa (an emblem of the enlightened mind of a Buddha). In contrast, a harrowing diagrammatic painting from the 19th or 20th century graphically conveys the opposite eventuality: clinched in the fangs and claws of a grimacing, monstrous creature is the “wheel of existence”—visually, a circle of parables illustrating the “muddy swamp” that most sentient beings return to again and again when they fail to recognize the true nature of the *Bardo* images.

One of the wrathful deities, the bull-headed form of the figure of Yama Dharmaraja, the Lord of Death, is the first to appear to the deceased through multiple manifestations and later as the judge who holds the mirror of karma to confront the dead with the positive and negative deeds of his past life. *Bardo* presents three rare metal sculptures of this deity, including a 16th-century bronze with polychromy that portrays Yama Dharmaraja with one hand raised with a bony club while performing a menacing gesture with the other. The small, rounded figure is cast with macabre ritual ornaments that include a crown of skulls and a large necklace of freshly severed heads.

The re-creation of a pair of shrine rooms, of the sort that would be found in monasteries in Tibet, is an exhibition highlight: one is devoted to wrathful protector deities; the other to peaceful deities. Also featured will be a unique three-dimensional mandala of the 100 archetypal deities of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, displayed in two integral parts: the deities and their cosmic palace.

The exhibition will be enhanced with audio-visual devices in which visitors will view a complete death ceremony of the *bardo* and an interactive DVD of the hundred deities' mandala palace.

Paired Exhibitions

Bardo is the first of two complementary exhibitions at the Rubin Museum of Art examining the various ways death has been viewed and visually represented throughout history. A 12th-century be-jeweled bronze reliquary arm from Belgium and a wooden club carved into the shape of a skeleton from Tibet are among the memento mori (death remembrances) to be displayed in *Bardo*'s companion exhibition, *Remember That You Will Die: Death Across Cultures* (March 19 to August 9, 2010), which explores how the imagery of death is used in Christian and Buddhist art. "Both faith traditions have sought an intensified preoccupation with death to instill the idea that death is a revelatory act and that life is a precious opportunity," says Dr. Martin Brauen, Chief Curator, Rubin Museum of Art, and the lead organizer of *Remember That You Will Die*.

Bardo-related Programming

The Tibetan Book of the Dead Book Club

Wednesdays from July 7-28 and August 11-25; 7:00pm

A series of seven sessions exploring this seminal guide to the afterlife from seven different vantage points: Each week Dr. Ramon Prats, curator of the *Bardo* exhibition and distinguished translator of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* into Spanish, will engage with an expert from a different discipline such as a neuroscientist, a dream analyst, and an Egyptologist to explore how this text, born out of one ancient culture, can be applied to our present.

Individual sessions: \$20

Members price for all seven sessions: \$105

About the Rubin Museum of Art

RMA holds one of the world's most important collections of Himalayan art. Paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are drawn from cultures that touch upon the 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. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

Admission to RMA is \$10 for adults; \$7 for seniors, middle- and high-school students, and artists (with ID); \$2 for college students (with ID); \$7 for neighbors (zip codes 10011 & 10001 with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children under 12 and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays between 6pm and 10pm.

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. The Rubin Museum of Art is located at 150 West 17th Street, New York, NY. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and V to 14th Street; N, R, Q, W, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.

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