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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan
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Wedged between India and China, Bhutan is one of the most remote places on earth. This fall, however, one need venture no farther than 17th Street and Seventh Avenue to view the finest examples of its artistic patrimony, the vast majority of which has never before traveled outside the tiny Himalayan kingdom. The occasion is the opening of the first comprehensive exhibition of Bhutanese sacred art in the continental United States at the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA), the foremost museum in the West for the study and display of the art of the Himalayas and surrounding regions.

The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan opens on Friday, September 19, 2008, and remains on view through January 5, 2009.

The Dragon's Gift has been organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii in cooperation with the Royal Government of Bhutan's Department of Culture and the country's Central Monastic Authority. The exhibition debuted in Honolulu earlier this year, before traveling to New York for its North American premiere this fall.

"Because Bhutan is unique among its Himalayan neighbors for never having been conquered, invaded, or colonized, its treasures have resided, largely intact, in the monastic settings for which they were created," says Martin Brauen, the new Chief Curator of RMA. "This exhibition is therefore a rare opportunity to explore an entire ethos untouched by the modern world." Ramon Prats, Senior Curator of RMA, who is responsible for the New York presentation, said, "RMA is especially pleased to provide a showcase on the East Coast for these rare objects, which are as valued for their function within a living spiritual tradition as for their considerable visual beauty."

“Almost a quarter of the works featured in this show were discoveries for the curatorial team, objects we never expected to find as we set out on an arduous selection process three years ago,” adds Academy Exhibition Coordinator John Johnston.

The Dragon’s Gift comprises 87 works of art in the New York presentation, including intricate paintings and images created using appliqué and embroidery framed in brocade, called *thangkas*; gilt bronze and wooden sculptures; and ritual objects ranging in date from the 8th to the 20th century, with especially strong examples from the 17th through the 19th century. Because most of the works of art come from active temples, where they still serve as consecrated objects, Buddhist monks will remain in residence at RMA during the period of the exhibition, performing the necessary ritual observances.

The exhibition is divided into sections designed to lead the visitor through the richly symbolic content of Tantric Buddhism, the official religion of Bhutan.

Exhibition Highlights

A brilliantly colored scroll painting showing the Buddha Shakyamuni as a luminous, golden figure in the supreme moment prior to his enlightenment is one of the works encountered in the first section of the exhibition, which is devoted to the historical Buddha (Shakyamuni) and other Buddhas. Circling the central Shakyamuni figure in this rare painting are 16 Arhats, or sages, each with different attributes, minutely observed and rendered. Nearby, a little-seen painting depicts five Buddhas in a densely layered mandala form. Valued for its bestowal of protection, this *thankga* is ordinarily kept in one of the most important religious centers in Bhutan and displayed only at special festivals, where it is said to bring blessings.

A finely carved and painted seated figure, not quite seven inches tall, is found in the second section, which comprises images of bodhisattvas, those beings who defer their own attainment of buddhahood to assist others on the path to enlightenment. This sculpture of the Bodhisattva of Compassion was found and selected for the exhibition in an early 17th-century temple set into a mountain above the oldest fortress in Bhutan. Its gilding and the painting of the face and hair, brightened to a degree unusual in Western restoration, are evidence of proper respect in the Buddhist tradition.

Many of the faces that peer out from the works in *The Dragon’s Gift* are vivid, animated, and full of individual character, like that of Drugpa Kunleg (1455-1529), who bestowed his teachings in the 16th century. Such charismatic historical figures as Shabdrung Ngagwang Namgyal (1594-1651), a revered teacher and the founder of modern Bhutan, are depicted, as are legendary figures, such as Padmasambhava, who is said to have spread Tantric Buddhism throughout the region in the 8th century. The three ferocious faces of an 18th-century statue—portraying a deity draped in human skins, skulls, freshly severed heads, and intertwined serpents—are simply terrifying.

A tiny, gem-studded gilt bronze statue showing the deity Vajrasattva and his consort in an erotic embrace highlights a section illustrating how Buddhist deities represent ritual practices like visualization. In this case, the complementary connection between masculine action and feminine wisdom—a principle called “yab-yum”—is powerfully evoked.

Ritual Dance (Cham)

Doubtless one of the most lasting contributions of *The Dragon’s Gift* is its documentation of the

ritual dance forms of Bhutan (*cham*), which are both spiritual practices in themselves and a means of communicating Buddhist teachings.

The Honolulu Academy of Arts, in conjunction with Core of Culture, a Chicago-based non-profit foundation devoted to dance preservation, compiled more than 300 hours of video documentation of *cham*: in the process, one dance was saved from extinction and four others revived for contemporary practice. This extensive database will be available to the public during the showing at RMA.

RMA plans to present free performances of the sacred *cham* dances in public spaces throughout New York City to coincide with the opening of the exhibition in September. Other programs will focus on the arts and crafts of Bhutan, its unique flora and fauna, its folklore and history, as well as a look at the youngest democracy's burgeoning film industry. Because there is often an intimate connection between dance and the arts in Bhutanese rituals, on occasion dance footage will be screened in the exhibition galleries, nearby related works of art.

The *cham* database has been given to the Royal Government of Bhutan and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, New York, the largest dance archive in the world, by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and Core of Culture.

Travel

After its showing at RMA, *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan* travels to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, where it will be on view from February to May 2009.

Exhibition Catalogue

The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue of the same name published by Serindia Press, London, which includes new photography of many important works *in situ* in Bhutan and essays on many aspects of Buddhist art and history of Bhutan by American, European, and Bhutanese scholars. (\$65, soft-cover, retail)

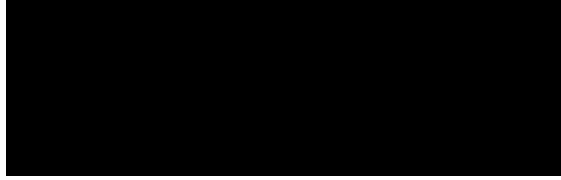
Painting Conservation

As part of a three-year-long project, the Honolulu Academy's Asian Paintings Conservation Studio trained Bhutanese monks in advanced techniques of Himalayan painting conservation, setting up workshops in Bhutan, including on-site conservation areas in temples, and training Bhutanese monks in Honolulu. The monks trained by the Academy will use their new techniques to continue conservation work in their home monasteries.

Support

This exhibition is organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan.

The art conservation, dance preservation, and educational programs of *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan* are made possible through the lead support of The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation.



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The presentation of *The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan* at RMA and related programs are made possible through generous support from the Blakemore Foundation, The Howat Family Foundation and the Asian Cultural Council.

About RMA

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 \$10.00 for adults; \$7.00 for seniors, middle- and high-school students, and artists (with ID); \$2.00 for college students (with ID); \$7.00 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 7 pm and 10 pm

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. 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.