



FROM: Rubin Museum of Art (RMA)  
150 West 17th Street  
New York, NY 10011  
Contact: Karen Kedmey  
Phone: (212) 620 5000 x331

Rubenstein Public Relations  
Contact: Holly Jespersen  
Phone: (212) 843 8071

***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

**Bon: The Magic Word**  
October 5, 2007 – April 14, 2008

RMA is pleased to present ***Bon: The Magic Word***, the first major exhibition dedicated to the art and culture of the Bon religion. The Bon are a culture group living in the Himalayas and Central Asia little known in the Western world. Before the northern advance of Buddhism to the Tibetan Plateau in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, however, Bon was the predominant indigenous culture and religion of Tibet and the surrounding regions. Bon influenced the profile of Buddhism as it took root in these areas and, over time, incorporated Buddhist influences. Scholars and collectors in both the east and west have tended to overlook the art of Bon, leaving a large landscape of art historical territory almost totally unexplored. Looking at the Himalayan region through the lens of Bon provides a deeper and richer understanding of this region's art and culture.

Curated by the noted Tibetologist and Guest Curator, Samten G. Karmay, and RMA Senior Curator, Jeff Watt, ***Bon: The Magic Word*** surveys extensive and varied works of art from the 12th to the 19th century, a significant number of which use distinctive Bon iconography unknown elsewhere in Himalayan art. The exhibition identifies a substrate of belief in the spirits of specific places and the natural formations of local mountains, rivers, rocks, and lakes springing from Bon that runs through the architecture of other religions in the region. It also encourages visitors to identify and distinguish the specific features associated with Bon art.

The *Bonpo* (practitioners of the Bon religion) are identified as a religious sect made up of a variety of ethnicities and language groups. The largest ethnic group is Tibetan, followed by the Naxi, a minority group in China, and the Kinnauri of Northern India. Western Nepal is also home to a large group who are identified with the Bon religion and culture, and many paintings in the exhibition are drawn from this region. Bon continues to be practiced today, with an estimated 1.5 – 2 million adherents.


While there is almost no written tradition of the early pre-Buddhist indigenous religious practices in the region, Bon has a coherent and unified system of doctrines based on a vast literature, much of it more than 1,000 years old. The title of the exhibition is taken from Bon literature which describes the religion as “*the truthful Bon, the magic word that makes the fool eloquent.*”

The approximately 100 works of art and artifacts in the exhibition, drawn primarily from the collection of RMA and private and museum collections in North America, will be presented in four broad subject groupings:

1. **Founders and Teachers:** representations of the life of Bon’s founder, Tonpa Shenrab, whose birth date continues to be debated by scholars, followed by paintings and sculpture of subsequent teachers from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries;
2. **Deities and Archetypal Models:** the Four Transcendent Lords who are the principal gods of the Bon religion, along with a variety of other deity figures, each of whom, in the Bon pantheon, are depicted in both peaceful and wrathful forms. Native and mythological animals frequently found in Bon art will also be seen in this section;
3. **Sacred Geography:** depictions of how the Bonpo relate to their geography, and how family clans are associated with specific mountains and regions. Traditional paintings depicting mountains, maps created from textual descriptions, and photographs will be used to highlight Bon Sacred Geography;
4. **Expressions of Culture:** this section will be anchored with traditional objects, old and new, along with paintings and photographs. Some objects include the traditional Bon *yungdrung*, or *svastika*, prayer flags, *namkas*, or thread-cross creations, along with other objects that have come to be identified with the Himalayas but that were originally associated with Bon culture and taken up later by Buddhism as it spread northward and across Asia.

Accompanying the exhibition is a catalog, [Bon: The Magic Word](#), which will be available at the Shop at RMA in early fall. Edited and with essays by Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watt, it also includes essays by noted Tibetologists Henk Blezer, Per Kvaerne, Dan Martin, Charles Ramble, and David Snellgrove.

Images are available upon request. Two highlights follow below:

<p><b><i>The Five Gods of the Five Sciences (detail)</i></b> Tibet; ca. 18th century Pigments on cloth 12 3/5 x 54 in. Rubin Museum of Art, C.2006.66.53 (HAR 200014)</p> <p>The five sciences are represented with the <i>God of the Physical World</i> in the center. The upper left depicts the <i>God of Art</i> and lower left depicts the <i>God of Language</i>. In the lower right is the <i>God of Medicine</i> and above him is the <i>God of the Living World</i>.</p>	
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***King of the Serpent Deities, Lui Gyalpo***

Tibet; ca. 14th century

Gilt copper alloy; repoussé

14 x 16 x 1 3/4 in.

Rubin Museum of Art, C2005.16.18

(HAR 65441)



**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.

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