

Living Traditions from the Land of the Thunder Dragon



THE TINY REMOTE Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan holds a singular position in the Himalayas. Tucked between China's Tibet Autonomous Region to the north and India to the south, it has never been colonized or invaded, so its spiritual and artistic traditions have flourished intact. *Druk Yul*, or the Land of the Thunder Dragon, as its people call it, has famously preserved its traditional culture.

The *Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan* at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York (through January 5) provided a rare view of both Bhutan's sacred objects and its traditional arts and practices. The exhibition, organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and the Department of Culture, Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs of the Royal Government of Bhutan, will travel to San Francisco in February. The eighty-seven works of art included are on loan from active temples and monasteries. Most pieces still serve as consecrated objects and have never left Bhutan before. Due to their importance as part of a living spiritual tradition, they were accompanied to New York by two monks who performed twice-daily *puja* rituals at a specially constructed shrine on the Rubin's top floor. Low and resonant, the monks' chants wafted through the galleries, enveloping the works in

morning prayers that purify "defilements" and evening prayers that invoke and safeguard the pieces' protective deities.

The Rubin's focus on Bhutanese tradition extended beyond the spiritual to highlight the art of weaving with daily demonstrations by artist-in-residence and master-weaver, Sangay Choden. Weaving (*thagzo*) is one of Bhutan's thirteen traditional arts and crafts (*zorig chusum*), which were formally codified in the seventeenth century. It is the only traditional art practiced almost exclusively by women. She



ABOVE, LEFT: Installation view, from left to right: Bodhisattva Manjushri, Seated Manjushri, and White Manjushri. Photo: Steven Williams. ABOVE, RIGHT: Detail of appliquéd and embroidered thangka of Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltzen (1647–1732) from Trashicho Dzong, Thimphu, Bhutan, eighteenth century. 131½" x 86½". Catalog Number 87. BELOW: Shrine Room at the Rubin Museum of Art. Courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Art and Honolulu Academy of the Arts.

began to weave at the age of seven, taught by her mother.

On the museum's first floor, the twenty-five-year-old Choden worked on a backstrap loom to complete a *kira*, the national dress of Bhutanese women. The garment is made from three sections of woven cloth characterized by fine supplementary weft weaving and intricate patterns. Since each section takes three months to produce, Choden brought two sections of the *kira* with her from Bhutan and finished the third during her residency. The trio of panels was joined together to form the finished rectangular garment. With baskets of brightly colored silk threads at Choden's side, her deft fingers flew across the loom, the quiet punctuated only by the periodic sound of the beater. The vivid geometric motifs which characterize her artistry are traditional,

but the combination of patterns and colors is uniquely her own. Such combinations, she says, represent the weaver's opportunity for creativity and individual artistic expression.

The sacred objects on view in the galleries offered examples of several other zorig chusum. The art of embroidery and appliqué (*tshemzo*) is used to create three exceptional *thangkas*, or portraits of Buddhist saints. *Tshemzo* is traditionally practiced by men, both monks and laymen. In an exquisite eighteenth-century portrait, the lama Jamgon Ngawang Gyaltzen is attended by monks and surrounded by lions, elephants, and warriors. In rich appliqué and embroidery, embellished with pearls and turquoise, the master sits on a snow-lion throne in a gesture of preaching.

The arts and spiritual practices seen at the Rubin owe their considerable vitality to the fact that they are integral parts of the daily fabric of life in a country that has carefully guarded and preserved its traditional culture. In providing a glimpse of these living traditions, *The Dragon's Gift* is a rare gift indeed. 🍀

Daily *puja* rituals were conducted by monks at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City through January 5. Daily weaving demonstrations by Sangay Choden were held September 19–December 12, 2008. Examples of her work can be purchased in the Rubin shop along with the 390-page illustrated exhibition **catalog** (published by Serindia Press, London. Softcover. \$65). For information, www.rmanyc.org. The exhibit will travel to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, February 20–May 10. www.asianart.org.

