

Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies

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KASHMIR, TODAY DIVIDED BY THE LINE OF CONTROL BETWEEN INDIA AND Pakistan, is more widely known for acts of violence and dissension than for its tradition of finely woven and embroidered “cashmere” shawls, its verdant green valleys, fields of purple flowers bearing saffron, walnut-wood carved furniture, intricately painted floral designs on papier mache and sturdy cricket bats made from willow.

Still, the natural beauty and aesthetic brilliance of the arts created there have made the place synonymous with the ideal of “paradise”, and *Collecting Paradise*—the exhibition and the catalogue¹ that accompanies it—builds on that notion. It focuses on the culture of Buddhism that, along with Hinduism, flourished in the region until the advent of Islamic rule in the 14th century.

Curated by Rob Linrothe, with essays by Melissa R. Kerin and Christian Luczanits, the exhibition and the catalogue focus on two strands—the impact of Kashmiri art on the Buddhist culture of the Western Himalaya² and the desire to collect that art among residents of that region as well as Western scholars in the early 20th century; and the implications this had for current collections in museums and with private art collectors in America and Europe. In particular the catalogue looks at two individuals who collected art in the early 20th century—the Italian Buddhist scholar Giuseppe Tucci and the American zoologist Walter Koelz—focusing on the impact of their collecting practices and the importance of their collections; a quarter of the objects in the exhibition are those acquired by these two men.

Historically, Kashmir was popularly known for its unsurpassed arts, as it still is in many ways today. Traders, monks and pilgrims from the Western Himalaya visited Kashmir, as did Kashmiri artisans travel to the Western Himalaya to work on specific building projects or private art commissions. The exhibition explores three periods in this history: the first in Kashmir from the 7th through to the 12th century, and two in the Western Himalaya—the 10th through 13th and 15th through 17th. While the greater emphasis is on Buddhist art forms, Hindu deities are also included as they provide a background to the artistic creativity that flourished in the region.

The objects in the exhibition are largely from museum and private collections in America with most of them being metal sculptures; there are also some fine examples of wood and ivory carvings, as well as painted and embroidered thangkas. They range from early examples of the 8th and 9th centuries, such as the brass Crowned Buddha Shakyamuni from Gilgit (the lower portion lending itself to the catalogue’s cover, figures 3 and 4) and an intricately carved wooden travelling shrine (figure 2). Later works of the 15th to 17th centuries, some attributed to Western Tibet, include several thangkas focusing on the Buddha and various Buddhist divinities (figure 1), and Mahakala and other wrathful deities.

¹ Eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara, Western Tibet, c. 1500. Ink and colour on canvas; 94.6 x 69.2 cm. Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund, 1982.147.

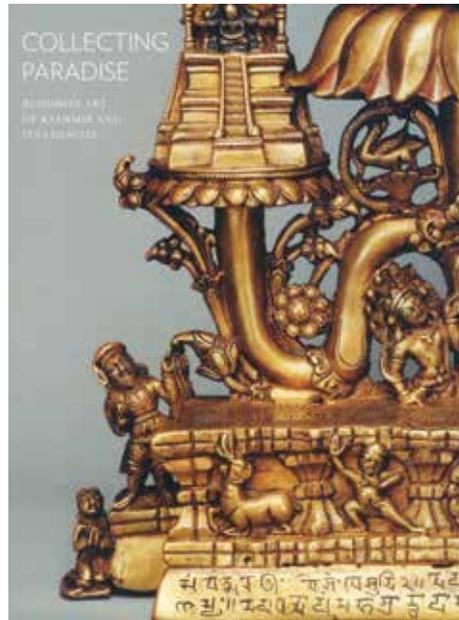
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Travelling shrine with Vairochana and bodhisattvas, Kashmir (?), 9th century. Sandalwood (?) with traces of red and green colouring; 31.1 x 35.6 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 44-18. Photograph: John Lambertson.



The catalogue is extensive and impressive; splendidly produced it both complements the exhibition and adds to the knowledge and understanding of Kashmir's influence on the artistic traditions of the Western Himalaya. This is often overlooked in studies of the area in favour of the artistic and cultural influences that came from Tibet in the 14th and 15th centuries and later.³ The catalogue offers opportunities to reflect both on the widespread presence of Kashmiri art forms in the Western Himalaya and on the inspiration they provided for later art works created in the area. The juxtaposition of images in situ with those from museums complements the exhibition and adds to its extensive nature. The catalogue looks at earlier examples such as the painted wooden covers of the Gilgit Manuscript from the 7th century now in the Sri Pratap Singh Museum, Srinagar, the Dankhar Buddha, 8th century, now in the Dankhar monastery in Spiti, and wall paintings from the monasteries of Alchi in Ladakh and Tabo in Spiti. Archival images from the early 1900s, showing the location and use of deities—such as a Seated Buddha in Bardan Monastery, Zangskar—present their continued worship in more contemporary settings, thus adding to the documentation on the subject.

What is also interesting in the catalogue is its exploration of collecting practices, especially of the two men mentioned above, and the questions they raise. While rumours of Tucci's questionable methods were already known to some scholars of the Western Himalaya and spoken about by residents of the areas he visited, they are seldom talked—much less written—about in the rarefied world of art collectors and museums. While the catalogue only focuses on two, there were of course several other individuals in India, as well as America and Europe, whose collecting practices were problematic.⁴ That the catalogue raises these issues is certainly commendable.



3 Crowned Buddha Shakyamuni, Gilgit, early 8th century. Brass with inlays of copper, silver and zinc; 31.1 cm. Asia Society, New York, Mr and Mrs John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.044. Photograph: Susumu Wakisaka.

4 The catalogue's cover shows a detail of the base of the Gilgit Buddha.

Finally, moving beyond, both the exhibition and catalogue raise questions on the maintenance of surviving examples of Kashmiri art forms both in Kashmir itself and in the Western Himalaya. Immovable structures—stone and mud buildings and wall paintings—especially face the threat of decay as well as natural calamities such as earthquakes and excessive rainfall, even demolition. While issues of conservation in the region are still new, they are certainly being raised. But as art forms are being lost and Himalayan artists move towards new directions today it remains to be seen if future generations will recognize the role of Kashmir's artisans over the centuries, and the legacy they have left behind. The importance of this exhibition and the catalogue lies in its contribution to such realization.

NOTES

- This writer viewed the exhibition at the Rubin Museum where it did not include the section "Collecting Culture: Himalaya through the Lens" which was shown at the Block.
- 1 Rob Linrothe, with Melissa R. Kerin and Christian Luczanits, *Collecting Paradise: Buddhist Art of Kashmir and Its Legacies*, New York and Evanston, IL: Rubin Museum of Art and Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, 2014.
 - 2 The Western Himalaya as covered in the exhibition includes the regions of Ladakh, Zangskar, Lahaul, Kinnaur and Spiti in India, and Western Tibet or Ngari currently within Chinese borders.
 - 3 Perhaps the only other exhibition to focus on Kashmir art and its legacy was *The Arts of Kashmir* held at the Asia Society and Cincinnati Art Museum, 2007–08. See the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition—Pratapaditya Pal, *The Arts of Kashmir*, New York: Asia Society, 2007. However,
 - 4 the scope of the present show is much broader as it stretches from the ancient period (300–1400) through the Mughal era to the present day. It is also noteworthy that the list of lenders includes institutions in Kashmir.
- 4 See Clare Harris, unpublished paper "The Missionary Turns Ethnographer: Walter Asboe's collecting strategies in Ladakh and Lahaul", presented at the International Association for Ladakh Studies Conference, Oxford, 2001; and Monisha Ahmed, unpublished paper "Collecting Ladakh: Representations of the Region in Public and Private Collections", presented at the Seminar on Museums and Changing Cultural Landscape, National Museum Institute, Leh, 2012.