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**ASIA SOCIETY MUSEUM PRESENTS
FIRST EXHIBITION TO BRING TOGETHER MATERIAL FROM
FAMED TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTERY**

GOLDEN VISIONS OF DENSATIL: A TIBETAN BUDDHIST MONASTERY

On view in New York from February 19 through May 18, 2014



Dhumavati Sridevi. Central Tibet, Densatil Monastery. Early fifteenth century. Gilt copper alloy with inlays of semiprecious stones. Asia Society, New York: Asia Society Museum Collection. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert H. Kinney in honor of Vishakha Desai, 2012.004. Photo © 2013 John Bigelow Taylor, Asia Society

Asia Society presents the first exhibition to explore the history, iconography, and extraordinary artistic production associated with the central Tibetan Buddhist monastery called Densatil that was destroyed during China's Cultural Revolution.

The exhibition reunites a selection of reliefs and sculptures salvaged from the Monastery's towering thirteenth- to fifteenth-century inlaid gilt copper memorial stupas (*tashi gomang*). Works on view are from public and private collections in the United States and Europe.

Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery illuminates the artistry of the *tashi gomang* stupas—special memorial stupas masterfully designed and cast in relief by artists, including craftsmen from Nepal—and the spiritual journey toward enlightenment laid out in their imagery.

“Asia Society is pleased to present this exhibition, a first attempt to recapture the magnificent splendor of

the Densatil Monastery and to create appreciation for its artistic, religious, and political aspects through new scholarship,” says Asia Society Museum Director Melissa Chiu.

The exhibition examines the unique design of *tashi gomang* stupas as huge, three-dimensional mandalas, each comprising a square base supporting six tiers with a stupa at the top. Historical sources indicate that there were eight *tashi gomang* stupas in the main hall of the Densatil Monastery; they housed the mortal remains of Buddhist adherents.

To help viewers visualize the stupas, a selection of photographs taken by Pietro Francesco Mele during Italian scholar Giuseppe Tucci's 1948 expedition to Tibet are included. From February 19–23, monks from the Drigung (Drikung) school of Buddhism will create a colored sand mandala onsite in a small gallery. The

completed sand mandala will be on display for the duration of the exhibition, and then ritually destroyed at its close.

Exhibition organization

Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery is organized to give a sense of the six tiers that made up each *tashi gomang* stupa. Viewers move through the exhibition as one would have moved around the stupa, with the iconography of each tier detailing the path of the spiritual journey towards enlightenment taken by a Buddhist adherent. Viewers encounter protectors of the Buddhist teachings, female deities, offering goddesses, and deities representing higher esoteric teachings. The last section of the exhibition focuses on the final stage of the spiritual journey, represented on the *tashi gomang* stupa by a reliquary that would have formed the structure's pinnacle and held the mortal remains of an enlightened adherent.

The exhibition is organized by guest curator Dr. Olaf Czaja with Dr. Adriana Proser, John H. Foster Senior Curator for Traditional Asian Art at Asia Society. A fully-illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition with an essay by Dr. Czaja, a professor at the Institute for Indian and Central Asian Studies, University of Leipzig, excerpts from the journals of explorers Sarat Chandra Das and Giuseppe Tucci, and catalogue entries by Dr. Czaja and Dr. Proser.

About the Densatil Monastery

Built in 1198, the Densatil Monastery was founded at the site inhabited by the monk Phagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170). Evolving from a hermitage, the Monastery was situated in a remote area of central Tibet close to the northern banks of the Tsangpo River. At the height of its power, the Densatil Monastery was one of the wealthiest Tibetan monasteries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The iconographic program created by the monk Jigten Gonpo (1153–1217), a disciple of Phagmo Drupa, laid the foundation for the tradition of erecting *tashi gomang* stupas to commemorate deceased abbots.

Throughout its history, the site figured in conflicts amongst monastic schools and factions, but it remained intact for centuries until its destruction during China's Cultural Revolution. Fragments and pieces of the site were salvaged and later dispersed around the world. In 1997, a new assembly hall and small temples were built on the site of the destroyed monastery and in 2010, a new main hall was constructed. Under the auspices of the Tibet Autonomous Region Ministry of Culture and the Drigung (Drikung) Kagyu school, reconstruction of the Densatil Monastery continues today.

Exhibition support

Major support for *Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery* comes from The Partridge Foundation, A John and Polly Guth Charitable Fund.

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Support for Asia Society Museum is provided by Asia Society Contemporary Art Council, Asia Society Friends of Asian Arts, Arthur Ross Foundation, Sheryl and Charles R. Kaye Endowment for Contemporary Art Exhibitions, Hazen Polsky Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, and New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Related programming

In order to provide additional context for the exhibition, Asia Society has organized the following:

- February 4–May 4: Lobby installation “Himalayan Sculpture from the Asia Society Museum Collection,” featuring four sculptures from the Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection which is a major part of the Asia Society Museum Collection.
- February 18: Members-only exhibition lecture with guest curator Olaf Czaja.
- February 19–23: “Creation of a Sand Mandala,” live with monks from the Drigung (Drikung) Kagyu school of Buddhism.
- February 25: Art talk on “Setting Densatil in the Treasury of Tibetan Art” with Katherine Anne Paul, Curator of Arts of Asia at the Newark Museum.

For more information on the exhibition and related programming, including public viewing hours for the creation of the sand mandala, visit AsiaSociety.org/NYC.

Exhibitions also on view

Also on view, from February 19 through August 3, is the exhibition *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*. The exhibition features *Transgressions II*, 2009, a video/shadow play from the Asia Society Museum Collection, as well as a selection of Malani’s artist books. One of the foremost contemporary artists from India, Malani was born in 1946 in Karachi before the 1947 Partition of India, and currently lives and works in Mumbai and Amsterdam. The exhibition is curated by Michelle Yun, Asia Society’s Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art.

Also on view from February 4 through May 3 is *Tales of Wonder: Indian Art from the Asia Society Museum Collection*. The exhibition comprises a selection of dynamic sculptures and paintings from Asia Society’s renowned collection of traditional Asian art, depicting religious scriptures and Indian epics. Organized to coincide with *Nalini Malani: Transgressions*, the *Tales of Wonder* exhibition is curated by Adriana Proser, Asia Society’s John H. Foster Curator for Traditional Asian Art.

About Asia Society Museum

Asia Society Museum presents a wide range of traditional and contemporary exhibitions of Asian and Asian American art, taking new approaches to familiar masterpieces and introducing under-recognized arts and artists. The Asia Society Museum Collection comprises a traditional art collection that includes the initial bequests of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, and a contemporary art collection.

Founded in 1956, Asia Society is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational institution headquartered in New York with new state-of-the-art cultural centers and gallery spaces in Hong Kong and Houston; and offices in Los Angeles, Manila, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, Sydney, and Washington, DC.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City.

The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m.–6:00 p.m. and Fridays from 11:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$12, seniors \$10, students \$7, and admission is free for members and persons under 16.

Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 p.m.–9:00 p.m. (free Fridays are suspended during the summer when the Museum closes daily at 6:00 p.m.). Find out more at AsiaSociety.org/museum

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