

Transformation through the manifest world

In selecting works for the exhibition, *Buyuhyn-Wana; The transformative persona*, the theme of personal transformation as revealed in physical objects has informed the choices. The works in my collection largely conform to the broad category devotional objects used in seeking intervention from higher powers. The cultures reflected in the exhibition are mainly Indian and Himalayan, Australian Aboriginal or other primary cultures, as it is towards these cultures that I have been most drawn and with which I have worked professionally over more than three decades.

As visual objects, the impact upon the viewer is concerned with iconography in the case of the Tibetan and Indian works, although within this there are many other elements contained. As the complexity of the icons represented is deep, I will draw attention to some aspects of this in the descriptions accompanying the objects. Other works such as the masks fulfill a variety of roles in effecting transformation through calling upon primal energies which enable the masquerader to actually embody the deity or the energy of a specific entity that is being summoned to intervene on behalf of those engaged in the ceremony.

Seen as they are in the context of an exhibition, the objects are inevitably diminished in the power which they would evoke in traditional manner of use where other elements of sound, movement (both of which encode specific meanings) and of course the essential element (or spirit presence) which rises up through the collective minds of the participants in traditional ceremonies, the origins of which extend back through many centuries.

In light of the above, we can only glimpse the embodied power and must allow our imaginations to approximate the impact which was once conveyed through their use by masters and which inspired supplicants. There is also the direct pleasure which we derive as people mainly brought up within the Western cultural tradition of appreciating the refined aesthetic contained within these works.

As the items are drawn from diverse cultural traditions, I am grouping works in a loose arrangement designed to recognize a dominant element in the manner in which each work was used. These groupings reflect perceptions, which evolved in my study of the artworks and cultures themselves combined with my personal study of yoga and meditation and the esoteric over many years. A former colleague recently identified himself together with me as being one who subscribes to the Primordial Tradition that is drawing from many esoteric traditions without aligning specifically to one. This is possibly what lies behind the connection, which persists between the works held in this collection in spite of the great cultural diversity.

From the period of the 18th Century the 'Grand Tour' which many English gentlemen embarked upon until the early part of the 20th Century to accumulate kind of the "cabinets of curiosities" has been a mark of cultural imperialism. Sensitive to that, I recognize the cultural plunder which has led to so many of these objects becoming available on the market and traded through dealers and auction rooms. My own attitude towards ownership of these items has evolved to an appreciation of the stewardship of these cultural objects in a way close to the understanding I now have of the "ownership" of land. Both notions of ownership strike me as a fiction and it is my hope that the works can inspire and evoke a broader understanding of the deeper elements of our collective being, breaking down cultural and ethnic barriers.

Sound



Nepalese conch shell
trumpet
1771
Tibet
conch shell

Sound, the primordial gesture as understood within the Vedas, the ancient Indian Hindu texts extending back more than 5,000 years where the AUM (OM) sound gave rise to both light and matter. Among the works included here are a Nepalese conch shell trumpet which was intended to invoke the deity. The conch is carved in low relief with a finely detailed figure of Vishnu riding his mount Garuda and a standing Bodhisattva. Dated dated Sambat 891 (1771 AD), the conch is one of the attributes of Visnu and represents the Dharma or Universal Law which is ubiquitous, the character of sound is that it penetrates every tiny nook, every fissure and is inescapable as is the Dharma.



bell and the vajra
15th Century
Tibet
bronze

The Tibetan bell (Sanskrit: *ghanta*. Tibetan: *dilbu*) and matching *vajra* (Sanskrit. Tibetan: *dorje*) also make use of sound to evoke a change within the subject. The bell resonates finely and for an extended time through the quality achieved in a prescribed alloy of the eight precious metals. The bell is embellished with friezes of vajras. The handle in the form of a vajra surmounts a Boddhisattva head and has a lotus motif in low relief deep in the interior. The bell is rung violently creating a cacophony of sound which is allowed to slowly fade creating an opening for the consciousness to settle into a place of single-focused meditation. Here it is used to create a monotonous sound and melody which act as metaphors for intuitive knowledge and wisdom.

The bell and the vajra are among the few possessions of the Tibetan monk, without them most of the rites and practices would be unthinkable. In his left hand the practitioner holds the bell, which represents the female principle. Its clear sound resonates then fades away representing transience, all that arises passes away. The male 'diamond scepter' (Sanskrit: *vajra*) is held in the right hand and represents the Absolute. *'Probably derived from Jupiter's sheaf of rays and the scepter of the Indian storm god Indra, vajra is also translated as 'thunderbolt'. It is held in the right hand and in the liturgy it embodies the truth at the essence of the diamond-its adamantine hardness, purity and indestructibility.'* Wilpert p.102 fig. 32



Tibetan kangling
Tibet
bone

The human thighbone trumpet (Tibetan *kangling*) produces an eerie wailing sound used in the Tibetan ceremony known as *Chöd*. As in Western culture, objects derived from the human body were held in awe and reserved for use in intensely magical ceremonies. They derive from a crucible of instruments from Tantric India and first appeared in the 9th Century. This ancient example appears to date from an early period judging from the rich dark patina.

The *Chod Kangling* is a simple length of femoral bone from just above the knee to about half way up the thigh. The *kangling* is only used in *Chöd* rituals (which should be performed outdoors in the open) along with the *Chöd* damaru and bell. In Tantric *Chöd* practice the practitioner, motivated by compassion, plays the kangling as a gesture of fearlessness, to summon hungry spirits and demons so that s/he may satisfy their hunger and thereby relieve their sufferings. It is also played as a way of “cutting off of the ego. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kangling>

In a substantial departure from the Himalayas but consistent with the theme of sound evoking transformation, the didgeridoo is an object which evokes the spirit voice.



Shamans Hand Drum
c.19th Century
Nepal
timber and animal skin

Ritual and Devotional Objects



Jain Devotional Shrine
c.18th Century
Northern India

This object is a Jain personal shrine intended through its portable size to be carried with the owner as a stimulus for devotional practice. It embodies the principle of sound as a primordial gesture, through representing the Om-Hrim Yantra, the combined seed syllable of the Universe containing the (Deity) *devata* principles. This finely made example comes from Rajasthan and dates no later than the 18th Century, probably earlier. *“By concentrating on the actual icon one can awaken its inner image in the mind for inward meditation and worship ... All Tantra art has about it something of a yantra, the formal attributes of a good image are all metaphors for aspects of the Devata itself, who is the intermediary between the worlds of reality-extended-in-time and the Formless Truth.”* Rawson p.52

‘Om is the whole world ... past, present and future ... all is Om ... whatever else transcends time ... is Om.’ (Mandukya Upanisad)



Libation Cup
18th Century
Tibet
copper

The finely formed copper vessel is a Libation Cup used to contain holy-water. It is most probably from Bengal and is shaped in the form of a *yonī*, a cosmic symbol representing the female sexual organ. It is 18th Century in date. This vessel is known as an *argha patra*, which is filled with water and held in the hand during a purification *puja* during which the water is poured over the deity to bathe the deity *devatā*. This is carried out as an act of worship and thus to accrue the benefit of this act. An image in a Pahari miniature shows Parasumara offering a libation of blood using the same for of vessel.

The *puja* is the most sacred of all Indian ceremonies and is done at specified times of the day, the most potent time being at the moment of an eclipse. Rather than being a simple act of worship, the *puja* is a highly evolved process in which offerings typically including flowers, incense, perfumes, lights, bells, music, and choice foods are directly offered to a representation of the deity whose intervention is being sought. '*The most important point in Tantrik puja is that the symbolism of the whole ceremony is taken over and applied by the pujari through an intense meditation on the significance of each act as he performs it.*' Rawson p.44



Kila, ritual dagger
c.15th century
Tibet
meteorite iron

This triangular bladed ritual dagger (Sanskrit: *kila*. Tibetan: *phur ba*) is from Tibet and dates from the 15th Century. Daggers of this type are typically made of either rock crystal (very rare), brass, wood or iron. In this example the central part of the handle is in the form of an endless knot symbolizing the eternal nature of the Universe and with three heads of protective monsters *mukharas*.

The purpose of the *kila* is not one of practical use as a weapon, rather the triple blade represents the blade's power to transform the negative energies known as the "three poisons" or "root poisons" (Sanskrit: *mula klesha*).

One of the principal methods of working with the *kīla* and to actualize its essence-quality is to pierce the earth with it; sheath it; or as is common with Himalayan shamanic traditions, to penetrate it vertically. For example; point down into a basket, bowl or cache of rice (or other soft grain if the *kīla* is wooden). The terms employed for the deity and the tool are interchangeable in Western scholarship. In the Himalayan shamanic tradition the *kīla* may be considered as axis mundi. For the majority of Nepalese shaman, the *kīla* is cognate with the world tree, either in their visualisations or in initiatory rites or other rituals.



A second example of a *kila* is included as a vibrant representation of a wood specimen. Wood is reported to be the preferred material for *kila* used by shamans. This example is from Bhutan and is 19th Century or early 20th Century.

image above: kila
19th Century or early
20th Century
Bhutan
timber

image right: Nepalese
necklace
c.19th Century
Nepal
tiger's claw, coins,
crystals, shells



The Nepalese necklace included above incorporates as many power objects as possible and is of a type used in Nepal to protect infant children. Placed around the head of the infant the necklace is expected to act as a talisman to protect the infant from choking as it ingests its first solid food. The viewer can determine the source of many of the attachments which include a tiger's claw at the bottom, various coins and crystals as well as cowrie and other shells which of course are tremendously rare in the Himalayas.



Sri-Yantra, the Universe
c.18th Century
Nepal
rock crystal

The beautiful rock crystal pyramid-form ritual object here is from Nepal is commonly known as a Sri-Yantra, a diagrammatic representation of the mantra, the most sacred and perfect representation of the Universe.

Sri Vidya is a Hindu Tantric religious system devoted to the Goddess as Lalitā Tripurasundarī (Beautiful Goddess of the Three Cities). The goddess is worshipped in the form of a mystical diagram (Sanskrit: *yantra*) comprising a central point bindi surrounded by nine intersecting triangles. It is found in two dimensional forms; as painted images or as in the accompanying example in brass as a flat plate. This rock crystal example is a three dimensional form known as Meru Yantra, also found in a special alloy of metals. It represents the unity of the guru, the initiate and the universal sound of the mantra. The Sri Yantra (sacred instrument) or Sri Chakra (sacred wheel) or Mahameru is a yantra formed by nine interlocking triangles that surround and radiate out from the central (bindu) point, the junction point between the physical universe and its unmanifest source. It represents the goddess in her form of Shri Lalita or Tripura Sundari, the beauty of the three worlds (Heaven, Earth, Hell). The worship of the Sri Chakra is central to the Shri Vidya system of Hindu worship. Four isosceles triangles with the apices upwards, representing Shiva or the Masculine. Five isosceles triangles with the apices downward, symbolizing female embodiment Shakti. Thus the Sri Yantra also represents the union of Masculine and Feminine Divine. Because it is composed of nine triangles, it is known as the Navayoni Chakra. *'These nine triangles are of various sizes and intersect with one another. In the middle is the power point (bindu), visualizing the highest, the invisible, elusive centre from which the entire figure and the cosmos expand. The triangles are enclosed by two rows of (8 and 16) petals, representing the lotus of creation and reproductive vital force. The broken lines of the outer frame denote the figure to be a sanctuary with four openings to the regions of the universe.'*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Yantra



gri-gugin, Tibetan ritual
flaying knife
17th/18th Century
Tibet
rock crystal

This rock crystal object is a Tibetan ritual flaying knife (Sanskrit: *kartri*. Tibetan: *gri-gugin*) used in its metal form as a practical implement it is the tool used for dismembering bodies of the deceased in the Tibetan form of body disposal whereby the fleshy parts of the body are fed to vultures and other birds of prey.

This example is probably 17th or 18th Century in date and was used in tantric ceremony to symbolize the cutting of illusion. The knife symbolically peels away layers of misconceptions: separating appearance and emptiness, destroying negative forces such as emotional defilements and ignorance and conventional knowledge.

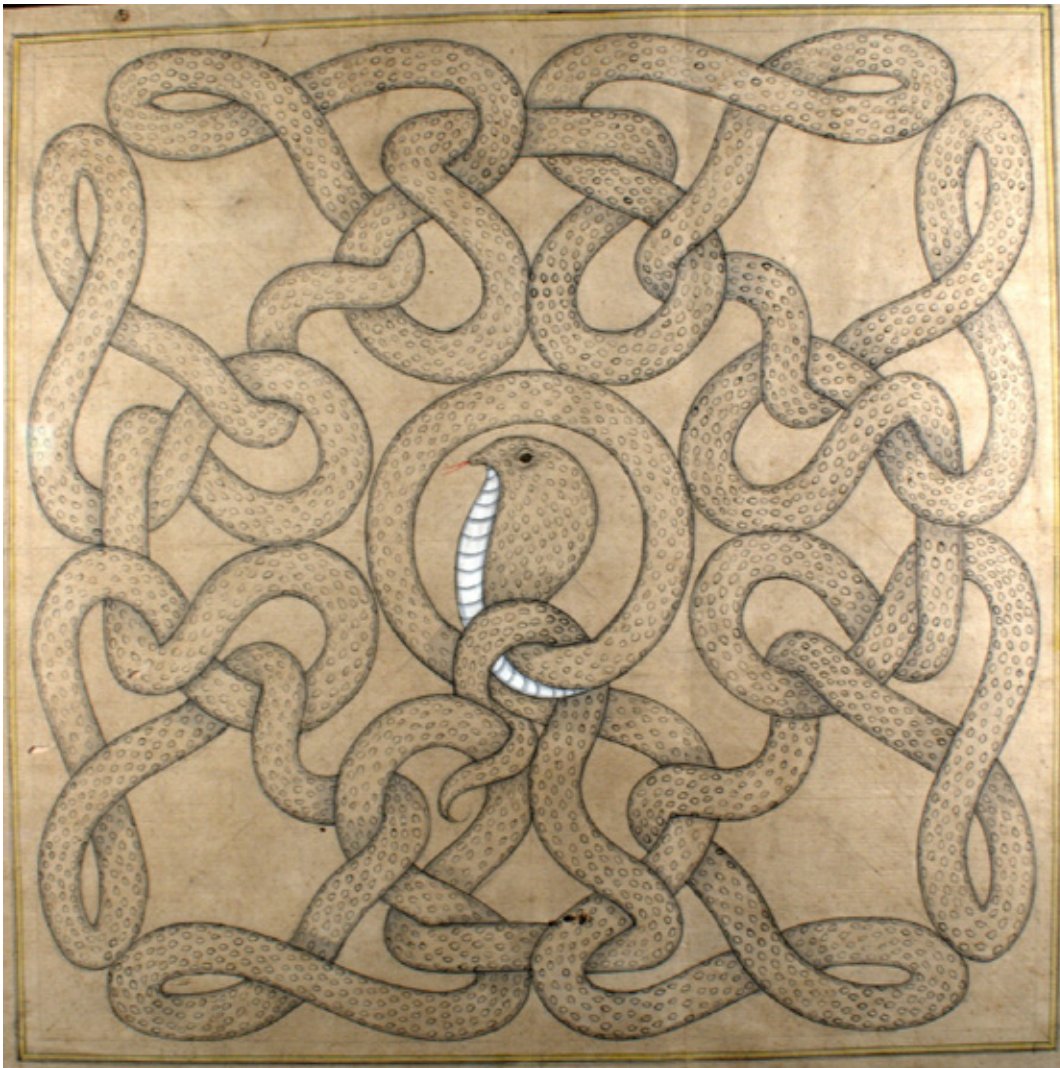


Sati, Devotional object
c.18th Century
India
bronze

This amazing and unsettling object is a Hindu *sati* arm, representing the most potent form of voluntary transformation, that of an elected death. The practice of *sati* or self-immolation of a wife following the death of her husband evolved from the legend of Shiva and his first wife Sati. By the Mughal period the practice had become embedded across much of India and amongst a broader social range.

However, this was not with the support of the Mughals themselves who attempted to limit its occurrence as did the British in the 19th Century.

The site of the burial of the ashes of a Sati were marked in several ways. Often stones were carved with a raised arm indicating the blessing bestowed by the Sati on her followers. This arm could appear on its own or emanating from a pillar. This brass arm appears to follow in this tradition but to embrace a three-dimensional representation. It may have been used to mark the burial site of a particularly noteworthy Sati, subject to the attention of devotees.



Naga Bandha
18th Century
Rajasthan, Northern
India
ink on paper

This image drawn in black ink and with some colour highlights is of a *Naga Bandha*, the closed circuit of the serpent's body representing the retention of psychic energy known as Kundalini Sakti which resides at the base of the spine in the base energy centre known as the *Muladhara Bhanda*. It represents also the potential which can be activated by the adept practitioner of yoga and tantra.

'In the Maladhara, Kundalini lies in the form of a coiled serpent. The innate self dwells there like the flame of a lamp. Contemplation of this radiant light as the luminous Brahman is the transcendental meditation.' This text comes from Gheranda Samhita which is a classical text describing seven limbs of yoga as taught by Sage Gheranda to his disciple, King Chandakapali. Sage Gheranda outlines a system which can take the serious aspirant from purification of the body to the highest states of samadhi and knowledge of the soul.

'Human experience owes to Tantra the discovery and the location of the centres of psychic energy, chakras, in the subtle or astral body. Kundalinin Sakti, coiled and dormant cosmic energy, is at the same time the supreme force of the human organism. Every human being is a manifestation of that energy, and the universe around us is the outcome of the same consciousness, ever revealing itself in various modes.' Kundalini The Arousal of the Inner Energy. Mokerjee, p.7



Stupa
c.14th Century
North East India
bronze

The Stupa is the most potent symbol of Buddha's transcendence encapsulating the past, existing in the present and symbolic of Nirvana.

Originally stupas were memorial structures built over the remains of Shakyamuni Buddha but later they were also used as personal reliquaries. The *stupa* as it is called in India or *chorten* in Tibet became popular as devotional objects and frequently contain treasured relics from high lamas. The bell-shaped base *and* is surmounted by a *harmika* of square shape and representing the four cardinal directions. This in turn is surmounted by a lotus form *chatravalli*, the symbol of purity it signifies that all rising from it is unblemished. The *chatravalli* includes a spire and diminishing circles and finial and represents the stages of Enlightenment. This example dates from the 14th Century and is of a style thought to come from North East India.



Kapalas are used mainly for esoteric purposes such as rituals. Among the rituals using kapalas are: higher tantric meditation to achieve a transcendental state of thought and mind within the shortest possible time. Libation to gods and deities is practiced to win their favour by Tibetan Lamas. The kapala is used as an offering bowl on the altar filled with wine or blood as a gift to the Yidam Deity or all the Deities and in the Vajrayana empowerment ceremony.



image above: Skull cup
(Sanskrit kapala)
c.15th Century
Tibet
bone, silver, laquer

image left: Kapala
c.15th Century
Tibet

This Tibetan Shaman's horn combines low relief images drawn from Bon, the earlier religion of Tibet and from Tibetan Buddhism (the Stupa. A tiered repository of sacred relics) as well as animist images such as the frog and scorpion. It would have been used for sorcery and as a means of accessing the power associated with the images which embellish it. Few devotional objects evoke a more poignant awareness of the transitory nature of existence than the human skull as used in conjunction with mediation. Saint Francis is shown holding a skull in contemplation of the Infinite and relics fashioned from human bone are common within Tibetan Buddhist and shamanic practice. This finely preserved skull cup (Sanskrit: kapala) is from the 15th Century or earlier and is remarkable in having retained its silver stand which is itself embellished with three skull images *citipati* and contained in a fitted case. The kapala is considered a legacy of ancient traditions of human sacrifice. In Tibetan monasteries it is used symbolically to hold bread or dough cakes, torma, and wine instead of blood and flesh as offerings to wrathful deities, such as the ferocious Dharmapāla (defender of the faith). The dough cakes are shaped to resemble human eyes, ears and tongues. The kapala is made in the form of a skull specially collected and prepared. It is elaborately anointed and consecrated before use. The cup is also elaborately decorated and kept in a triangular pedestal.



Coco-de-mer
Southern India
coconut shell

The coco-de-mer is one of the most beautiful representations of the *yonī*, the human female vulva. It is found exclusively in the Seychelle Islands and examples such as this derive from the shores of Southern India where they have been washed ashore. The original form would have been rough and textured, this example is centuries old and has been paired back and polished to accentuate the human female form. *'The whole womb-complex was often symbolized by signs referring to the outer appearance of the human vulva, as in numerous emblems and objects from the European palaeolithic caves. Indian Tantra preserves this symbolism, alongside its own anthropomorphic images of the Goddess. The Tantrika who makes puja to one of the many small items of the female vulva (called yoni) is making it to that all-embracing creative energy for which the yoni is the symbol.'* Rawson p.54

The Deity as a vehicle for Transformation



Vishnu
c.15th Century
Nepal
mercury gilded copper
bronze

Deity worship as means of personal transformation is somewhat remote from the Western tradition seeming to belong to a world which was easily characterized as heathen by missionaries, the image of the Golden Calf '*Thou shalt not bow down before graven images ...*' In practice it is simply a means of accessing the many attributes of the One God as revealed in the myriad different aspects of the creation. The supplicant seeks to embody aspects of the deity who is relevant to their particular needs at the time.

For example the classic image of the Creator and Preserver within the Hindu tradition is Vishnu (see above). The Vishnu figure here is from Nepal and dates from the 15th Century. It is mercury gilded copper bronze typical of Nepalese metalworking. In Hindu sacred texts, Vishnu is described as having the divine blue color of water-filled clouds and as having four arms. He is depicted as holding a padma (lotus flower) in the lower left hand, a unique type of mace used in warfare known as a Kaumodki gada in the lower right hand, a Panchajanya shankha (conch) in the upper left hand and a discus weapon, Sudarshana Chakra, in the upper right hand. In worshipping Vishnu the supplicant contemplates the qualities represented by the different accoutrements and seeks to embody them within their own being, perhaps not so distant from the transubstantiation of the flesh as in Catholicism.



Vishnu, Narasimha
Lion: The Great Protector
c.15th Century
Orissa, India
bronze

The seated lion-headed figure is from Orissa and also dates from the 15th Century, although it is not readily apparent this is another manifestation of Vishnu called Narasimha. This avatar of Vishnu is worshipped in order to access the qualities of literally becoming lion-hearted, he is accordingly one of the most popular avatars and is known primarily as the “Great Protector” who specifically defends and protects his devotees in times of need.



Avalokitesvara
c.18th Century
Nepal
gilded bronze

Avalokiteśvara is known throughout the Buddhist world in many different names and a vast array of different manifestations as well as being both male and female. He is the Bodhisattva of compassion and is called upon to safeguard humanity. The notion of the Bodhisattva itself is one of great compassion for it is the term applied to a soul who through great merit has escaped the fate of being reborn into this world but who has foregone that great goal by accepting rebirth in order to assist others in their strivings for escape from rebirth. This also embodied risk for there is always the possibility of again becoming ensnared by *Maya* illusion, which would entail further reincarnation in this, the realm of suffering. In Sanskrit Avalokiteśvara is also referred to as Padmapani (Holder of the Lotus) or Lovesvara (Lord of the World). In Tibetan, Avalokiteśvara is known as Chenrezig and is said to be incarnated as the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa and other high lamas.

This figure is Nepalese and probably 18th Century although it is on a 12th Century earlier base. It is fire gilded using gold dissolved in mercury and literally fused onto the bronze beneath. The lives of the artisans would have been brief with the attendant toxicity through mercury poisoning.



Guan Yin
c.12th Century
China
gilt bronze

This very fine Yuan or Early Ming Gilt Bronze is the Chinese equivalent of the Avalokiteśvara named Guan Yin in Chinese it dates from the 12th Century. It is notable in the great finesse and accuracy of the casting of the double-lotus figure (flowers now missing) seated on an openwork structure representing clouds, this would have come from a wealthy private shrine or temple.



Amoghasisshi
c.14th Century
Western Tibet
bronze

Amoghasisshi is one of the five Tathagatas which are emanations of the Absolute as it is divided into a five-part system. These five parts represent the fine and the coarse components of the Universal system. Each Tathagata fills a specific role in the organizational structure of the manifest world and plays a central role in the esoteric and secretive teachings of Tibetan Buddhism.

Amoghasisshi's Shakti/consort is Tara, meaning Noble Deliverer or Noble Star and his mounts are garudas. He belongs to the family of Karma whose family symbol is the double vajra (thunderbolt). Amoghasisshi is associated with the conceptual skandha or the conceptual mind (as opposed to the non-conceptual or sensational mind). His action towards the promotion of Buddhist paths is the pacification of evils. This is symbolised by Amoghasisshi's symbol, the moon. He gestures in the mudra of fearlessness, symbolising his and his devotees' fearlessness towards the poisons or delusions.

Amoghasisshi is usually coloured green in artwork and is associated with the air or wind element. His season is summer and his heavenly quarter, the north. This bronze figure of Amoghasiddhi is from Western Tibet and dates from the 14th Century. There are fine details of a copper inlay strip running across the top of the forehead.



God of Wealth Kubera
1st half of the 19th
Century
Sino Tibetan
bronze

This Sino Tibetan copper alloy bronze represents the God of Wealth Kubera, seated on a lion he holds a rat which is associated and often shown spewing jewels. Not surprisingly this God is identified with acquiring wealth and is prayed to on that account. The figure dates to the first half 19th Century.

The most recognised image of devotion within the Asian Buddhist world is of course the historical Buddha, Buddha Shakayumi.



Buddha
16th Century
Thailand
bronze

The Buddha wears an unadorned monk's robe, folded across the left shoulder. His right hand extends to the ground in the earth-touching gesture (*bhumisparsha mudra*), signifying the Buddha calling on the earth to witness his attainment of enlightenment. His legs are crossed, with only the sole of the right foot visible. With a serene facial expression, the Buddha is shown with the pronounced cranial bump, capped with a flame-like jewel, characteristic of Thai Buddhist art. For Theravada Buddhists, this type of image serves as a focus for contemplation of the *dharma*, or Buddha's teachings.



This Jain bronze figure of a Jina represents one who has attained the Jain equivalent of Buddhahood. Jainism embodies the practice of complete non-violence, famously the Jains sweep the ground in front of them to avoid the risk of treading on and killing ants. Jainism emphasises spiritual independence and equality between all forms of life, they are of course fully vegan.

“The word Jainism is derived from a Sanskrit verb *Ji* which means to conquer. It refers to a battle with the passions and bodily pleasures that the jaina ascetics undertake. Those who win this battle are termed as *Jina* (conqueror). The term *Jaina* is thus used to refer to laymen and ascetics of this tradition alike.

Jainism is one of the oldest religions in the world. Jains traditionally trace their history through a succession of twenty-four propagators of their faith known as *tirthankara* with Ādinātha as the first *tirthankara* and Mahāvīra as the last. For long periods of time Jainism was the state religion of Indian kingdoms and widely adopted in the Indian subcontinent. The religion has been in decline since the 8th century CE due to the growth of, and oppression by, the followers of Hinduism and Islam.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jainism>



image left:
Figure of a Jain Gina
9th/10th Century
Southern India
bronze

image right:
dakini: Makara Mukha
19th Century
Sino Tibetan early 19th
century,
cold painted
bronze

This striking figure shows the dakini known as Makara Mukha who is one of the two dakinis who protect the demonic protectress of Lhasa and of the Potala, the traditional residence of the Dalai Lama, prior to the Chinese occupation. Intended to be ferocious, the Makara) (literally sea monster) headed dakini is a virtuoso piece of metal working, she wears a flayed human skin over her shoulders and back and dances on a figure representing trampling on an elephant-headed figure representing ignorance. Sino Tibetan early 19th century, cold painted.

Mahākāla (Dharmapala)
protector of dharma
c.15th Century
Sino-Tibetan
bronze



This fearsome and intense bronze is Sino-Tibetan and dates from the 15th Century. Mahākāla (Sanskrit) is a Dharmapala, a protector of dharma. Mahākāla is relied upon in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. He is depicted in a number of variations, each with distinctly different qualities and aspects. He is also regarded as the emanation of different beings in different cases, namely Avalokiteśvara. Mahākāla is typically black in color. Just as all colors are absorbed and dissolved into black, all names and forms are said to melt into those of Mahākāla, symbolizing his all-embracing, comprehensive nature. Black can also represent the total absence of color, and again in this case it signifies the nature of Mahākāla as ultimate or absolute reality. This principle is known in Sanskrit as “nirguna”, beyond all quality and form, and it is typified by both interpretations.

Mahākāla is almost always depicted with a crown of five skulls, which represent the transmutation of the five kleshas (negative afflictions) into the five wisdoms. The most notable variation in Mahākāla's manifestations and depictions is in the number of arms, but other details can vary as well. For instance, in some cases there are Mahākālas in white, with multiple heads, without genitals, standing on varying numbers of various things, holding various implements, with alternative adornments, and so on. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mah%C4%81k%C4%81la>



Mahākāla called Nyingshuk
c.17th/18th Century
Nepal
timber

This wood figure of Mahākāla is six-armed version of Mahākāla called Nyingshuk the name of which came from Khyungpo Naljor, the founder of the Shangpa Kagyu. The sculpture is in a dancing posture, rather than standing straight up, and is a very advanced Mahākāla practice.

This example is Nepalese and dates from the 17th/18th Centuries.



Bhairava (Lord Shiva)
c.17th/18th Century
Nepal
timber

Bhairava (Sanskrit: sometimes known as *Kaala Bhairava*, *Kal Bhairab*, *Annadhaani Bhairava*) is the fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva associated with annihilation. He is one of the most important deities of Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Nepal who originated in Hindu mythology and is sacred to Hindus, Buddhists and Jains alike.

The origin of Bhairava can be traced to the conversation between Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu recounted in “Shiv Maha-Puran” where Lord Vishnu asks Lord Brahma who is the supreme creator of the Universe. Arrogantly, Brahma tells Vishnu to worship him because he (Brahma) is the supreme creator. This angered Shiva who then incarnated in the form of Bhairava to punish Brahma. Bhairava beheaded one of Brahma’s five heads and since then Brahma has only four heads. When depicted as Kala Bhairava, Bhairava is shown carrying the decapitated head of Brahma. Cutting off Brahma’s fifth head made him guilty of the crime of killing a Brahmin (Brahmahatyapap), and as a result, he had to carry around the decapitated skull for twelve years and roam as Bhikshatana, a mendicant, until he had been absolved of the sin.

In the form of the frightful Bhairava, Shiva is said to be guarding each of these Shaktipeeths. Each Shaktipeeth temple is accompanied by a temple dedicated to Bhairava.

This example is from Nepal, the deity is perhaps the most popular in Nepal and is ubiquitous through the Kingdom. It dates from the 17th/18th Centuries. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhairava>

Animism and Shamanic Intervention



Mahakala mask
c.18th Century
Tibet
composite materials:
resin, fabric, polychrome

In this section of the works from the collection there is greater diversity of cultures and ethnicities than in the previous sections. The theme contained here is one of accessing Universal energy through a variety of means including dance; potent magically imbued objects which are charged with special powers in the mind of the believer; the accoutrements of the shaman including masks worn to evoke a particular energy or deity.

Continuing the focus on Himalayan cultures the masks from the northern provinces of India and the foothills of the Himalayas have a particular appeal to me. It is perhaps the combination of subtlety of form and intensity of expression which attracts me, the Tibetan 18th Century mask of Mahakala shown above is undeniably impressive in its role representing a ferocious defender of the faith.

As with many larger masks from the land above the tree-line where large dimension wood is scarce, the mask is constructed of composite materials, resins and fabric and is painted in polychrome, It represents the great *Kala* the god associated with time. Masks of this nature combine the diverse traditions of shamanism, village myths and the classical traditions of Buddhism.

Masks from this region fall broadly into the three categories of those depicting deities, heroes and comic characters and include monastery and temple masks work in traditional ceremonies as well as village masks and those employed by the shaman.



Khroda deity
Mahakala
c.16th Century
Bhutan
timber

I am including another fine and early example of a mask of Mahakala, this one is from Bhutan and is among the finest and earliest masks I have encountered from this region.



carved mask
c.17th Century or earlier
Himachal Pradesh,
Northern India
Himalayan spruce

The finely carved mask from Himachal Pradesh is certainly of an early date, possibly 17th Century or earlier. It is carved in Himalayan spruce and makes great use of the knots in the wood to accent to cheekbones of the face. The forehead contains the reddish pigmented and incised trident identifying it as being associated with Lord Shiva. It is thought that it was used in dances intended to summon help from the Earth spirits and from Lord Shiva at times of environmental challenge, floods, droughts of other challenges to agriculture.



Carved mask
c.17th Century
Monpa Sherdukpen
tribal people, Bhutan
timber

This powerful mask is from the Monpa Sherdukpen tribal people who are ethnic Tibetans living in Bhutan and dates from the 17th Century or earlier. It is of a steppe tiger and bears characteristics from the Tang dynasty in 9th Century China. There is certainly an interesting possible connection to much earlier masks.



Snow lion
19th Century
Himalayan
timber

The second example of a Himalayan feline mask is this powerful Bhutanese mask representing a snow lion, painted and incorporating Buddhist motifs in the form of the skull *citipati* heads across the top it clearly evokes the spirit world.

The combined human and animal aspects contained in this fine Monpa Sherdukpen mask of a deer whose features are superimposed over those of a human evokes a magus-like energy and creates a transfixing atmosphere. Clearly it is accessing animist energies. Its precise use is unknown although it may be associated with appropriation of the energy of the deer to assist the hunter.





image far left: *Monpa Sherdukpen*, deer mask
19th century
timber

image left: Lion mask
Pilachamundi
18th Century
Karnataka, South West India
bronze

Holding the theme of animism combining with mainstream religion, in this case Hinduism, the Bhuta masks of Karnathaka interfuse the two. This mask known as *Pilachamundi* is clearly representing the lion energy which is also represented in Hindu deities as we saw earlier with the Orissan bronze of Narasimha, the avatar of Vishnu. Bhuta is still an alive and vital aspect of the lives of the native people of southern India and there is an active borrowing of archetypes from Hindu cosmology.

Metal masks are used in bhuta worship practiced in Tulu Nadu, the Tulu-speaking coastal region of Karnataka state in southwestern India. *Bhutas are supernatural beings or divinized ancestor spirits. Hundreds of different bhutas are worshiped, each embodied by a particular metal animal or human-face mask. Boars, buffalos, and fierce forms of the god Shiva or his attendant ganas are especially popular.*

Koola (spectacular, all-night theatricals featuring ritual possession) are held to propitiate and communicate with bhutas. An elaborately made-up and costumed medium invites a specific bhuta into himself. The medium can wear the bhuta mask over his face or on top of his head, or he can hold one in his hands during the performance. The bhuta then sings, dances, tells stories, gives advice, and solves problems for the sponsoring family or village group. Bhuta masks may be reused but sponsors often commission new ones for a performance, while older pieces are stored in temples and auctioned off when no longer needed. Bhuta worship in Tulu Nadu probably dates back at least to the fourteenth Century, although most extant metalwork is significantly more recent.' <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/277334.html>

image right:
The boar mask, *Panjurli*
c.19th Century
Karnataka, South West
India
bronze



image far right:
Body Mask, Goddess Kali
19th Century
bronze

The boar mask is from known as *Panjurli* among the Bhuta entities is representative of the cosmic boar. Bhuta is a Sanskrit word which means spirits or those that have passed away. It is also a word used in reference to a spirit cult in the Tulu Nadu region or Southern coastal Karnataka of Southern India. According to Frederic Rond, 2011, *'In Tulu Nadu, hordes of boars often invaded and destroyed the cultivated lands so the farmers started worshipping and giving offerings to Panjurli, the spirit in the form of a boar, thinking that this would appease his mood and thus keep the wild animals away from their fields.'* <http://asianart.com/exhibitions/bhuta/intro/index.html>

This belief was later on absorbed by Hinduism through the following story. *'Goddess Parvati was keeping a boar as a pet in her garden on Mount Kailash. Unfortunately this animal was destroying everything around and one day Shiva got so furious that he killed it. Parvati became sad and upset and, in order to make her forgive him, Shiva brought it back to life and transformed it into a spirit that he sent to earth with the mission of protecting righteousness and truth.'* Frederic Rond, <http://asianart.com/exhibitions/bhuta/intro/index.html>

This beautiful brass Body Mask is used to represent the Goddess Kali as she is incorporated into Bhuta ceremony. It is identifiable as such through the cobra naga heads which constitute the suspension loops above and to the side of the breasts. The masquerader would be a man, also wearing a face mask and full regalia, much of it in metal requiring great strength and stamina in the exertions of the dance for which the costume was constructed.





Dyak shaman's box
c.19th Century
Kilmarta, India

This Dyak shaman's box contains a haunting array of power objects employed by the shaman in accessing the spirit world. The two figures attached to the front are each "charged" with magic materials inserted between their limbs against their chests.



Ancestral Spirit
19th Century
Cameroon, West Africa
timber, antelope skin

This striking skin-covered wood head is from the Ejagham tribe in southeast of Nigeria and extending eastward into Northern Cameroon and belongs to the Ekoi-speaking peoples. This group is renowned for the heads and skin-covered helmet-masks which are unique in Africa. Earlier skins of slaves, later skins of antelopes, were used.

Two types of masks dominate: helmet masks and crest masks, when the mask is made fresh animal skin was stretched and tacked over the soft wood from which it is carved. After the skin dried, it was stained with pigments made from leaves and bark. It is presumed that all masks represented ancestors.

The skin covering of a mask served as a magical agent to invoke ancestral spirits, thus eroding the barrier between living and dead participants in communal rituals. Nigeria, 19th Century.



Guari, Goddess of Power,
Creation and Victory of Good
over Evil
19th Century
Kerala in southern
India
timber

This powerfully carved wood head from Kerala in southern India represents Guari, Goddess of Power, Creation and Victory of Good over Evil. She is known by 108 names from the Durga Saptashati, as such she is a manifestation of Parvati, consort of the of Lord Shiva, and is known as the motherly form of Mother Goddess Gauri Jagadamba, Parvati is another form of Shakti, the wife of Shiva and the gentle aspect of Maha Devi, the Great Goddess. 19th Century.



Healing figure from
Keaka ethnic group
19th Century Cameroon,
West Africa
timber

This powerfully carved figure is from the Keaka ethnic group in Cameroon, West Africa. It is a power figure of a type described as being used in healing practices. The tip of horn inserted in the back of the figure is filled with magical charges and sealed with cloth. It is further embellished with a cowrie shell , these were used as currency throughout Africa as they defy counterfeiting. Cameroon, 19th Century.



Cikorda Rai
Instructional Painting
c.1960s
Bali
paint on canvas

This elaborate painting was gifted to me from a Balinese Shaman called Cikorda Rai, still alive in his late 90s and reputedly a prince from the royal house of Ubud. Cikorda told me that it was one of only two or three paintings he had ever executed and that it is an instructional painting done for his students more than 50 years ago. He is a profoundly impressive man who has a well deserved reputation as a healer and spiritual teacher. At least one friend of mine attributes her recovery from cancer to intervention on the part of Cikorda Rai.



image above left:
Karma Phuntsok *Manjusri*
1996
acrylic on canvas

image above right:
Karma Phuntsok
Avalokitesvara
1996
acrylic on canvas

The two paintings by Karma Phuntsok are the most recent paintings from my exhibited collection but they have clear links to the much earlier works from India and Tibet. Karma Phuntsok was born in 1952 in Lhasa, Tibet. He and his family fled Tibet after the uprising against the Chinese in 1959, escaping into India as refugees. It was in India that Phuntsok had the opportunity to study Thangka painting with a traditional Tibetan master. He has since been making paintings based on Tibetan Buddhist deities. Phuntsok migrated to Australia in 1981 and now lives in the 'Bush' north of Kyogle. He says "My recent paintings are mostly experiments, interweaving traditional techniques and symbols, with modern inspirations."

Mañjuśrī is a Bodhisattva associated with transcendent wisdom in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In Esoteric Buddhism he is also taken as a meditational deity. The Sanskrit name Mañjuśrī can be translated as 'Gentle Glory'. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manjusri>



image right:
Namarrkon (the Lightning God)
c.1940
Kakadu, Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark

The early bark painting shown here is of Namarrkon (the Lightning God) and comes from the Kakadu region. It is painted over an earlier image of a fish. Namarrkon is the God who dispenses justice in the form of lightning strikes on those who have drawn his ire. The stoe country from where this painting comes is hugely active with many hundreds of lightning strikes per hour occurring when the hot rocks of the country generate static electricity in the moisture laden air of the build-up to the wet season.



Attributed: (Paddy) Captain Jambuwal
Creature of the Dreamtime
c.1960s
Oenpelli (Gumbalanya)
Western Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark

This marvelous bark painting is attributed to one of the earliest painters who born in the late 19th Century and still working in the 1960s, (Paddy) Captain Jambuwal. It represents a vigorous depiction of a creature from the Dreamtime and bears the artist's name Djambuwal (sic) on the reverse. Painted at Oenpelli (Gumbalanya) Western Arnhem Land.



echidna hunt
c.1950s
North West Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark

This bark painting is of an early date as evidenced by the remnant spinifex gum along some of the edges indicating it had been used inside a bark shelter as were constructed to provide shelter during the wet season. It is an echidna hunt and would have represented an “increase” ceremony directed towards successfully sourcing echidnas as a food source.



image left:
Yirawala c.1897-1976
Lorrkon (log coffin) ceremony
c.1950s
Marugulidban, Arnhem Land,
Northern Territory
natural earth pigments on bark

Yirawala (1903-1976) is considered by many to be the finest bark painting artist. His work was known to modern European artists, and Picasso commented on the finesse and quality of his work stating that he was envious of his (Yirawala's) ability.

This work representing the *Lorrkon* (log coffin) ceremony employs dancing skeletons as its subject matter. It is thought to have been painted at Minjilang (Croker Island) Western Australia.



next page:
 Jayinyanu David Downs
 c.1925-1995
 Kurtal making heavy weather
 c.1984
 Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia
 Natural earth pigments and synthetic
 binder on linen

image right:
 Yirawala c.1897-1976
 Two waterholes
 c1950s
 Marugulidban, Arnhem Land, Northern
 Territory
 natural earth pigments on bark

This Australian Aboriginal bark painting by the celebrated artist Yirawala and represents two sacred waterholes. A similar painting in the National Gallery of Australia is titled Baby Dreaming wells and Creator Beings. Ubar ceremony: drum and wallaby dance, illustrated in S. Le Brun Holmes, Yirawala: Painter of the Dreaming. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1994, plates 117,118 and 125 respectively.



This painting is fitting as the last work in this exhibition as it is intended as a deeply magical image. The artist Jayinyanu David Downs (c1925-1995) has produced an image of Kurtal making heavy weather, c.1984, painted at Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. Kurtal is the Rain Man from Ngarrangkarni and the Walmajarri term for the Dreaming. As with other Rain Men such as Jintiripalin, Paliyara, Nyunjun and others he is a local manifestation of the Water Snake or Rainbow Serpent.

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