

“Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism” at Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University

By Catherine Fox
For the AJC

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The mandala, commonly the image of a square within a circle, is the representation of sacred space in Buddhist tradition. Although the form has infiltrated western art and thought, its religious meaning is not deeply understood.

“Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism,” a beautiful exhibition at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, is an opportunity not only to learn about the mandala's complex meanings and functions but also to enjoy the exquisite embodiment in paintings, sculptures and ritual objects. Organized by the Rubin Museum in New York, it spans the 8th century to the present.

Because the West is most familiar with tangkas, or paintings, of mandalas, it's natural to assume that the mandala is an abstract diagram. But it is much more: the mandala is a (square) palace protected by circular walls and the fundamental structure of existence, replicated in the body, the community, the cosmos.

The large and richly embellished wooden model of the palace in the center of the first gallery brings this home immediately. Made by the monks of the Drepung Loseling Monastery in India, with which Emory has a special relationship, it immediately recalibrates one's reading of the rest of the work in the show. A computer animation in the next gallery provides a high-tech aid for good measure.

A 12th century copper sculpture in the shape of a lotus is another three-dimensional representation of the mandala. When the petals are closed, it resembles a bud, a symbol of potential. It is presented here with the petals open, so that you can see the nine small sculptures of siddhas, or masters, inside.

The exhibition stirs admiration for the craftsmanship and imagination of the artists who created these intricately detailed works and seem to apply the same care to each one, no matter how small or private.

One display features a densely carved 10-inch-square woodblock, the actual woodcut and the woodcut folded into a tiny amulet. It is bound with myriad strings arranged to create a colorful pattern.

But these objects are not intended to be art. They are aids to worship. Tantric Buddhism, the kind most commonly practiced in Tibet, is a teacher-guided meditative practice through which an individual seeks to dissolve the self and achieve a oneness with the infinite. Tangkas, for example, are visual prompts to be used during meditation.

Some are beatific. They help the practitioner imagine himself in a state of grace as a buddha (an enlightened being) in a palace surrounded by fellow buddhas and deities. Others are quite horrific. Intended to aid one in overcoming base emotions, they depict wrathful deities in mandalas whose rings of intestines encircle a flayed skin of a human body. Talk about confronting your demons.

The idea of the mandala as the fundamental structure of the universe suggests the interrelatedness of all things. It speaks to something common to all religions (as well as our growing ecological consciousness). Every action we take impacts universe. A better self means a better world.

Fact Box

"Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism."

Through April 15. 10 a.m. -- 4 p.m., Tuesdays -Friday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturdays; noon -5 p.m. Sundays. \$8. adults; \$6, students, seniors and children ages 6-17; free for children 5 and under free, museum members and Emory students, faculty and staff. Michael C. Carlos Museum, 571 South Kilgo Circle., Atlanta. 404-727-4282. www.carlos.emory.edu

Buddhist monks from Drepung-Loseling Monastery will construct a sand mandala in the museum Wednesday through Feb. 11 during museum hours.

Related exhibitions

"Contemporary Mandala: New Audiences, New Forms" Through April 15. Emory Visual Arts Gallery, 700 Peachtree Dr. 404-712-4397.

"The Sacred Round: Mandalas by the Patients of Carl Jung." February 5–May 6. Oglethorpe University Museum of Art,

4484 Peachtree Road NE. 404-364-8555

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