Review: Enlighten yourself at “Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism” at Carlos museum

By JERRY CULLUM | Jan 30, 2012

After some two decades of visits from the Dalai Lama and exhibitions of Tibetan art in Atlanta, most of us are at least acquainted with the painted mandala as a representation of a complex, symmetrical building with a single enlightened being at its center. But the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University’s “Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism” makes it clear that the mandala painting isn’t a diagram like a blueprint; it’s an aerial perspective like a topographical map.

Mandala of Thirteen-deity Yama Dhamaraja Tibet; 18th century pigments on cloth 12 x 12 in. © Rubin Museum of Art

According to Emory religion professor Sara McClintock, who has worked with the Carlos on the presentations accompanying their remarkable transmutation of an exhibition originally organized by New York’s Rubin Museum of Art, the mandala should actually be considered a symbolic representation (in the form of a palace) of the sphere of energy that surrounds an enlightened being.

One might compare it to the force fields of radiant glory that surround the saints in certain Eastern Orthodox icons or envision it, as one scholar described as a bird’s-eye-view of the soul.

The exhibition begins with a stunning object that has never been on public view before, simply because it was completed in November 2011. The monks of Gyuto Monastery in Dharamsala, India spent several years carving an immense wooden sculpture of the Guhyasamaja mandala, representing the palace and its gates in its fully dimensional splendor. Juxtaposed with flat representations of the same image in the type of mandala paintings with which we have previously been familiar, this introduction to the exhibition instantly accomplishes the perspective-flipping discussed at the beginning of this review.

There are other types of mandala design for specific purposes, however. The familiar combination of squares and circles that we have seen in previous exhibitions are juxtaposed with other examples of sacred geometry, most notably the triangle that serves as a trap for the ego, which has to be gotten out of the way if enlightenment is to be achieved. Furthermore, mandalas appear in more forms than paintings of the type attached to brocaded thangkas; there are examples here of wooden plates on which other objects (a tripod, for example) would be placed.
The mandala itself is hung on the adjacent wall, and as the wall text observes, the Kalachakra meditational practice associated with this mandala “develops the concept of structural correlations among all things, in particular the connection between the universe, the mandala, and the human body.”

With eyes thus freshly opened, viewers will then be able to consider the vertiginous depth and breadth of Buddhist cosmology, symbolized in metal offering trays through which the devotee is expected to present an analogue of the universe one rice grain at a time. In addition to representations of the universe in such objects, the Buddhist world system is illustrated in instructional paintings of the sacred Mount Meru at the world’s center and the twenty-five heavens that rise above it. Some of these objects are being presented publicly for the first time after centuries in which they were viewed only in the context of initiation. They are not art objects, or objects for worship; they are precise instruments for the transmission of wisdom, to use the technical term.

They have an immediate emotional resonance even without the initiatory practice, but they weren’t created for purposes of aesthetic enjoyment, or even to be contemplated in isolation from the rituals through which they are introduced to the initiate. As with the simpler case of devotional objects, when we encounter them as uninstructed viewers we understand only the smallest fraction of their contents as well as their purposes.

This doesn’t change the fact that simply to view the objects is to alter your perspective, in ways that may surprise you. In its own subtle, sometimes dizzying way, this show itself is transformational.

The Carlos exhibition, which runs through April 15, is the centerpiece of a campus-wide mandala immersion, which should provide more diverse ways of contemplating the meaning and function of the mandala than have ever been offered in Atlanta, if not in the whole United States. A sampling:

- The monks of Drepung Loseling will make a sand mandala at the Carlos February 1-11.
- A Living Mandala of perennial plants to be installed in the spring in the Pitts Garden of Emory’s Cannon Chapel.
- “The Sacred Round: Mandalas by the Patients of Carl Jung,” at (and organized by) Oglethorpe University Museum of Art.