

14 December 2011

## In the steps of the Buddha

NGV International | FREE | 17 Dec – 1 June 2012

On 17 December, the National Gallery of Victoria will open *In the steps of the Buddha*, a remarkable exhibition that showcases the NGV's outstanding collection of Buddhist art.

Comprising over 80 works, this exhibition tracks the path Buddhism took across Asia, presenting ancient works dating as far back as the second century alongside contemporary work by celebrated Chinese artist, Kim Hoa Tram, and everything in between.

Dr Gerard Vaughan, Director, NGV said: "The NGV first collected a Japanese Buddhist art object in 1887 and since then, the collection of Buddhist art has expanded to include works from India, China, Nepal, Tibet and Southeast Asia. It is a unique display of works and a wonderful final show for the NGV's 150th anniversary year.

"*In the steps of the Buddha* is the first Buddhist art object exhibition to open at the NGV since the Olympic Games were held in Melbourne in 1956. This show is a must-see for all Victorians, as many of the works are rarely on display," said Dr Vaughan.

This exhibition shows a diverse range of media including ritual objects, sculpture, ceramics, masks, prints and paintings.

A highlight of this exhibition is the 12th century Japanese sculpture *Sho Kannon Bosatsu* (pictured), one of the most important acquisitions in the NGV's 150th anniversary year. This devotional figure portrays a great being of mercy and compassion. Bosatsu can be regarded as Buddhist saints, individuals filled with living compassion who rather than enter nirvana after attaining enlightenment choose to remain in the life-death cycle to guide and redeem other unenlightened living souls.

Some of the most highly acclaimed Kannon Bosatsu in Japan are the flying Apsara of Byodo-in Temple in Uji city near Kyoto. These national heritage listed works carved by important Buddhist sculptor Jocho (died 1057) show a clear connection in sculptural style, apparel, facial expression and historical provenance to the NGV's recent acquisition.

Another important work on display is by celebrated contemporary artist, Kim Hoa Tram. Chinese born in Vietnam Tram is now working in Melbourne and for nearly 20 years has immersed himself in Zen Buddhism. He is inspired by the wisdom of Zen and the Chinese tradition of painting and calligraphy.

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Kim Hoa Tram's minimalist painting *Stillness* (2005) portrays a monk immersed in meditation turning inward with his back to the viewer; it is achieved with extreme simplicity and precision. The gap in the circular outline of his shaved head suggests a luminous aura surrounding him. A meditative state of calm stillness is created by this image, as echoed in the Chinese character *jing* (stillness), which is seen in the inscription.

Also on display are two exceptional examples of Himalayan works from the 17th and 18th centuries, a Tibetan painting of *The life of Tsongkhapa* and a gilt bronze sculpture from Nepal depicting *Kalachakra and Vishvamata*. The Tibetan painting is a visual biography of Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), a revered Tibetan Buddhist leader, scholar and reformer. The painting shows numerous scenes from the lama's life including teaching vignettes and images of the various monasteries he established. This large painting in opaque watercolour on cotton is the only one of its kind in Australia.

The Nepalese Kalachakra sculpture is an incredibly intricate and complex example of bronze casting using the lost wax technique. It also embodies the concept of the union of wisdom and compassion, embodied in the female deity and the male deity respectively, a central concept in tantric Buddhism. This concept developed from tantric Hinduism, in which the *shakti* or personification of female dynamic power energises the male deity.

The historical founder of Buddhism was Prince Siddhartha Gautama who was born c.563 B.C. in the kingdom of Kapilavastu (now in Nepal). After meditating under a Tree of Wisdom at Bodhgaya, Prince Siddhartha attained spiritual Enlightenment and became Buddha, the Awakened One. The Buddha was awakened to the realisation that all life is suffering which is caused by attachment to this world. In the third century B.C. the earliest form of Buddhism, the Hinayana (Small Vehicle) Buddhism or Theravada Buddhism was conveyed from India and Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia.

A new form of Buddhism, the Mahayana (Great Vehicle) Buddhism, was introduced from India via Central Asian trade routes to China as early as the first century and then to Korea and Japan in the sixth century. Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from Nepal and China no later than the seventh century, where a specific school of Buddhism, known as Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, became the dominant religion.

A diverse and engaging range of programs including talks, meditation workshops, a butter sculpting demonstration and creative workshops, have been developed to complement this fascinating exhibition. For more information visit [ngv.vic.gov.au](http://ngv.vic.gov.au).

***In the steps of the Buddha*** is on display at NGV International from 17 December 2011 to 1 June 2012. Open 10am–5pm, Wed–Mon. Entry is free.

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**CAPTION:** JAPANESE *Sho-Kannon Bosatsu* Heian period, 12th century, Cypress (Hinoki), lacquer, gilt, crystal 172.0 x 60.0 x 50.0 cm (overall) Purchased with funds donated by Allan Myers AO and Maria Myers AO, 2011

