

Art Treasures Picturing Padmasambhava

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Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche as he is known to Tibetans, is one of the most popular subjects in the visual culture of the Tibetan-speaking Himalayan regions and the Tibetan plateau. This legendary tantric master is credited with enabling, almost single-handedly, a successful introduction of Buddhism into 8th century Tibet and is celebrated in Tibetan literary, historical and biographical sources

as the Second Buddha. Second in significance historically only to the Buddha Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava is considered to be more closely involved in creating the Tibetan cultural identity. He is also praised for ensuring the continuous flourishing of Buddhist teachings in Tibet. His life stories say that, foreseeing troubled times in the future, he concealed numerous teachings throughout the

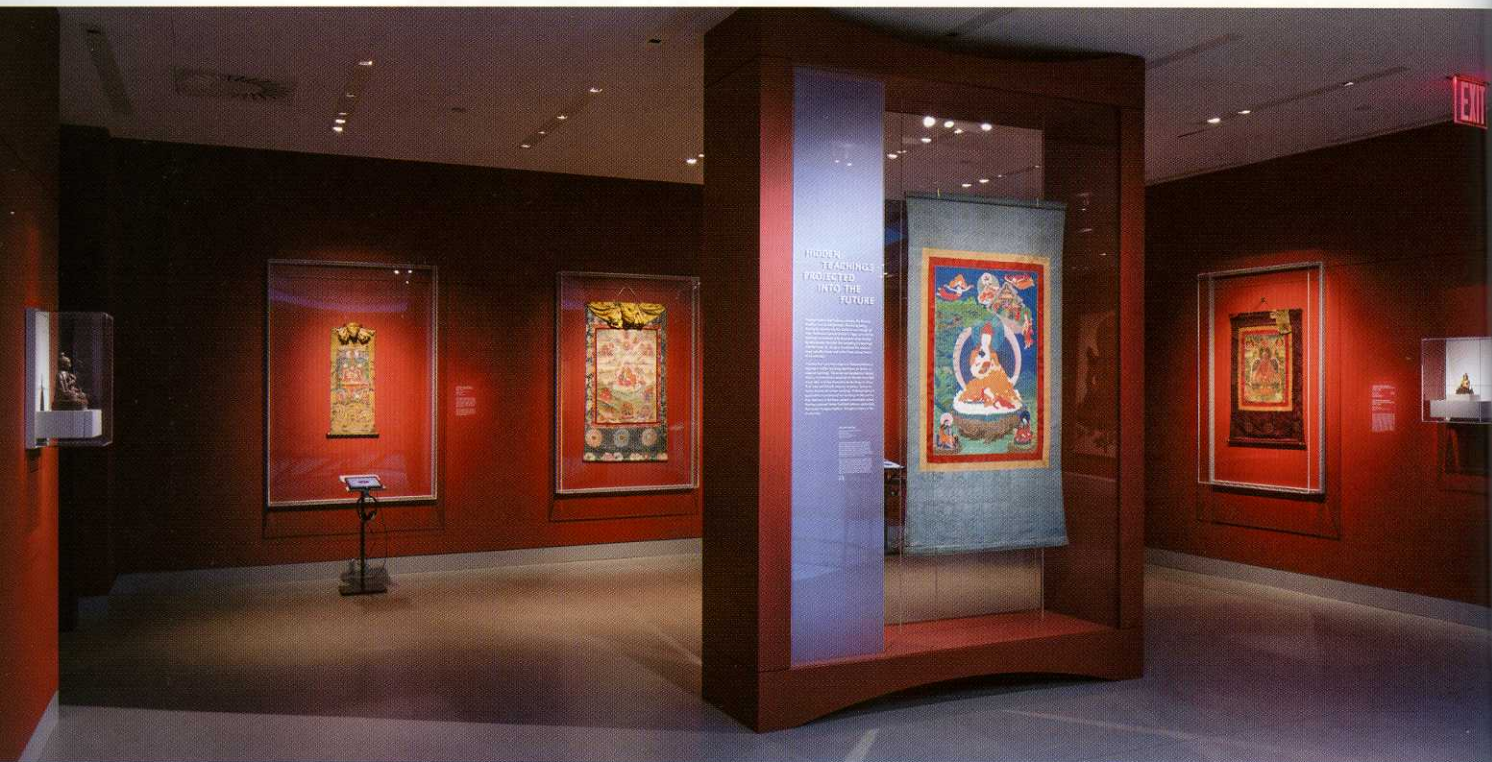


Fig. 1 Installation of the exhibition 'The Second Buddha: Master of Time' at The Rubin Museum of Art, New York, February 2018

Himalayan lands to be discovered as 'treasures' (T. *terma*) when needed in the future. Those discovering the *terma*, known as 'treasure-revealers' (T. *tertön*), are the reincarnations of Padmasambhava's disciples. Due to their karmic link with the master, forged when they were his students in their past lives, they are able to find, remember, transcribe and share the teachings with others in their present life. Many of today's Tibetan Buddhist practices trace back to Padmasambhava, and both the literary and visual traditions of the *terma* teachings are rich and complex.

Padmasambhava's legendary biographies detail his life story from the moment of his miraculous birth in a lotus on Danakosha lake in Odiyana to his becoming a crown prince, to his renunciation and study with various masters and practice of Buddhist tantra in India, to his journey to Tibet and subjugation of the indigenous gods and teaching activities there. With the numerous narratives about the discovery of *terma*, the biographies of the discoverers, and the actual teachings, many of which result from the discovery of the *terma*, the legacy of Padmasambhava's impact on the Tibetan and Bhutanese cultures and the culture of the Tibetan-speaking areas of India and Nepal is truly tremendous.

This diverse literary, ritual and narrative material is likewise reflected in the visual and performed arts, which are numerous in their forms, iconography, composition and patronage. However, despite the wealth of artistic representations related to Padmasambhava, little attention has been paid to this legendary figure so important for Tibetan visual culture.

The Rubin Museum of Art's exhibition 'The Second Buddha: Master of Time', on view from 2 February 2018 to 7 January 2019, launches a year-long theme at the museum centring on 'the future' (Fig. 1). The show explores the wealth of art related to Padmasambhava, focusing on the universal notions that arise from the narratives about this famous master, highlighting the interconnected nature of past and future and inspiring us to ponder how the future can be affected. Several of the objects are exhibited for the first time in the United States (loans from the Museum Rietberg, the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich, and the Alain Bordier Foundation), and many are shown to the public for the first time, including pieces from the McCormick and Rubin museum collections. Overall,

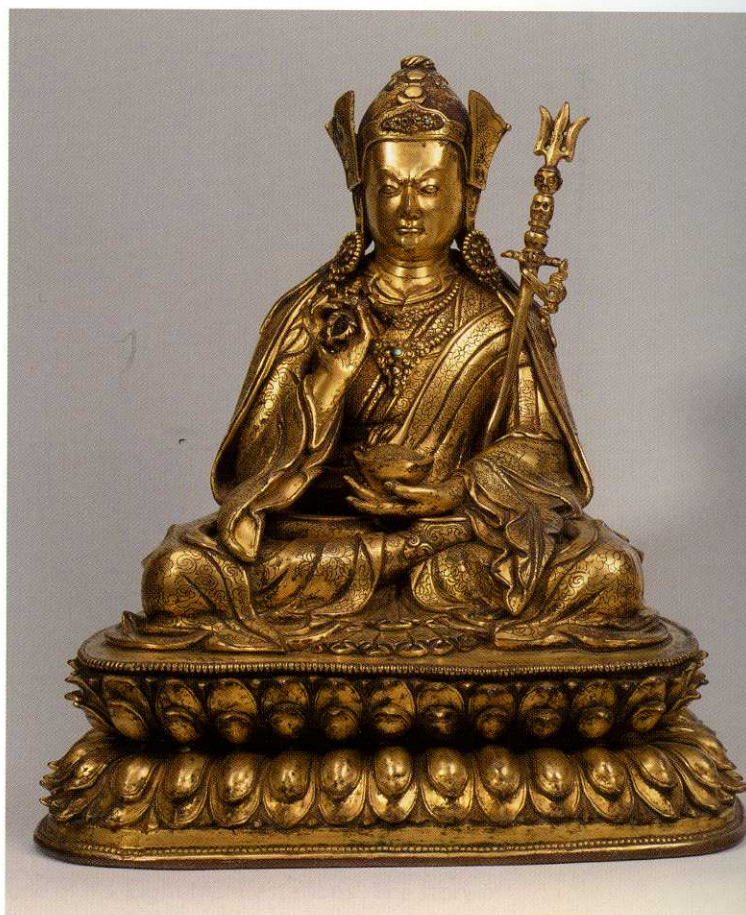


Fig. 2 Padmasambhava
Tibet, 17th century
Gilt copper alloy, 32 x 30 x 20 cm
Museum Rietberg, Zurich
Berti Aschmann collection (BA 120)

the exhibition brings together 41 works of various forms of visual art from different regions and time periods, a large number of which are from the Rubin's own collection. The exhibition is accompanied by a publication, co-published with The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, where the show will be on view in 2019. This article highlights a few remarkable examples of artworks depicting Padmasambhava that deserve closer attention, some of them included in the exhibition.

Padmasambhava, 'the Lotus-born', is often portrayed in a generally recognizable iconographic form, wearing a lotus hat and distinct types of garments and almost always holding a staff (Skt *khatvanga*), a skull-cup (Skt *kapala*) and a ritual sceptre (Skt *vajra*) (Figs 2 and 3). Padmasambhava's



Fig. 3 Padmasambhava
Tibet, 15th century
Silver and gilt copper alloy with inlays
of turquoise and coral, 16.5 x 12.1 x 9.5 cm
The Rubin Museum of Art
(C2005.16.36 [HAR 65459])

lotus hat is adorned with the unified symbols of sun and moon and usually tipped with a single vulture feather; the hat is symbolic of his miraculous lotus birth. He wears a king's robe, a monk's shawl and jewelled ornaments. His royal garment is said to have been given to him by the king of Zahor, who was filled with faith after Padmasambhava emerged unscathed from a fire, seated on a lotus in a lake of oil transformed into water (see below). His implements are those of a tantric practitioner.

One of the formalized iconographic arrangements depicting Padmasambhava is a group of three figures, in which the larger Padmasambhava is flanked by his two consorts of slightly smaller size. In the three-figure sculpture in Figure 4, the consorts are distinguished by their attire and are recognizable as the Indian princess Mandarava, wearing a sari, and the Tibetan princess Yeshe Tsogyel, wearing a Tibetan garment. The inscription on the base of the lotus identifies the sculpture as a three-part image of the guru, referencing Padmasambhava's name Guru Rinpoche, the Precious Teacher. It also states the



Fig. 4 Padmasambhava with consorts
Mandarava and Yeshe Tsogyel
Tibet, 17th century
Brass, height 32 cm
Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland



Fig. 5 Milarepa or a Mystic with Two Royal Attendants, here identified as Padmasambhava as Loden Choksé with the king of Zahor and Princess Mandarava (?) Tibet, 15th century Gilt bronze, height 14–19.1 cm Norton Simon Art Foundation, from the Estate of Jennifer Jones Simon (M.2010.1.110.1-3.S) (Image courtesy of the Norton Simon Art Foundation)

name of the donor who commissioned the work and dedicates the act of its making to the long life of his parents and the benefit of all beings.

According to the legendary biographies of Padmasambhava, his life was full of conquests, the subjugation of demons, and teaching activities in India as well as across the Himalayas and Tibet, all of which garnered him the many names or epithets by which he became known. Over time, these names assumed specific iconographic forms that are thought to represent the famous master's aspects in the best possible way, sometimes even picturing him as a wrathful deity. The artists, and the patrons and devotees who commissioned Padmasambhava images, generated numerous visual and stylistic expressions of these aspects of the master's enlightened power.

An interesting example is the three-figure sculptural assembly in the collection of the Norton Simon Museum, which currently identifies it as 'Milarepa or a Mystic with Two Royal Attendants' (Fig. 5). It is clear why this assumption was made. The central figure raises his right hand to his ear, a gesture often found in images depicting the famous Tibetan yogi Milarepa (c. 1052–c. 1135). In this case, however, it is quite possible that the central figure

is Padmasambhava depicted as Loden Choksé, one of his 'Eight Manifestations'. The story of Padmasambhava's life, according to versions of his biography, especially the earliest 12th century and two most extensive 14th century texts, describes his time in India when he studied tantra with various Buddhist masters, perfecting tantric practices and becoming famous under the name Seeker of Supreme Intelligence, Loden Choksé in Tibetan. He then went to the country of Zahor, where he sought a consort with whom to practise tantra, the princess Mandarava. The people of the country and the king, offended by the foreign mendicant, seized the couple and tried to burn them at the stake, but both the master and his consort emerged unscathed, seated on a lotus in the centre of the lake.

Although in paintings Padmasambhava's manifestation as Loden Choksé is often depicted wearing a king's robes, here the central figure is imagined as a yogi. However, the assembly here could indeed depict Loden Choksé flanked by the king of Zahor and Princess Mandarava. Usually, Loden Choksé holds a double-sided hand drum (*Skt damaru*) raised in his right hand, whereas in this sculpture the right hand is raised but empty. The hand gesture here, then, is perhaps a reference to listening to the sound of the *damaru*, which

symbolizes the sound of wisdom, or to the sound of wisdom being sung or recited in the form of prayers or mantras. The garments of the flanking figures echo Central Asian rather than Indian attire, and are usually found in Tibetan art in images representing kings and princesses. There is no inscription on the sculpture to clarify or confirm the figures' identity.

One especially noteworthy loan to the exhibition is a large, mural-size painting depicting Padmasambhava together with numerous episodes from his life (Fig. 6). It was most certainly once part of a larger visual programme in a temple that included several murals. Murals were not always painted directly onto primed walls but, as is the case here, were sometimes painted on large canvases and then attached to a wall. The painting has been cut on the left, possibly where it met the junction of two walls. The painted valance along the top testifies to this format and evokes the textile valances that run along the top of walls where they meet the ceiling.

A comparable painting, possibly from the same visual programme and also focused on Padmasambhava, was recently sold at auction in Germany (Fig. 7). This painting depicts Padmasambhava residing in his palace on the Copper-coloured Mountain, and may have been the central mural of the ensemble. The two paintings are very close in size and are also similar stylistically. Notable are the raised gold details as well as the depictions of the central figure (Figs 6a and 7a). There are also similarities in the visual arrangement of the episodes nestled within the landscape that serves to frame each scene. The predominantly green and blue palette and the stylistic features of the figures within the vignettes are also alike and probably indicate production by the same atelier, although by the hand of different artists. These paintings are examples of significant monastic patronage of painted depictions of Padmasambhava and indicate that their creators had access to extensive resources.



Fig. 6 Scenes from the life of Padmasambhava
Tibet, c. 18th century
Pigments on cloth, 120 x 250 cm
Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich
(#14091)



Fig. 7 Padmasambhava
East Tibet, 18th century
Pigments on cloth, 118 x 246 cm
Private collection
(Image © and courtesy of NAGEL AUKTIONEN)



Fig. 6a Detail of Padmasambhava in the painting in Figure 6



Fig. 7a Detail of Padmasambhava in the painting in Figure 7



Fig. 8 Padmasambhava
Tibet, 15th century
Pigments on cloth, 70 x 40 cm
RRE Collection, Switzerland
(presented for auction at Sotheby's, March 2018)
(Image courtesy of Sotheby's Inc. © 2018)

Two remarkable works from the RRE Collection in Switzerland also represent the sophisticated patronage that resulted in paintings of very fine quality (Figs 8 and 9). The first is a relatively early depiction of Padmasambhava that shows him flanked by his two consorts, a triad that had become a well-known iconographic norm in Tibetan art by at least the late 13th century (see, for instance, a painting in the Shelley and Donald Rubin Collection: P1994.26.1 [HAR 160]). The painting in Figure 8 depicts Padmasambhava in the centre, his Eight Manifestations in the top register, and his 25 disciples positioned around the central triad. It is also possible that the latter are tantric masters (Skt *mahasiddha*). The third figure from bottom in the left column has dogs as his companions, which is usually a feature in depictions of the *mahasiddha* Kukkuripa.

An interesting addition to the Padmasambhava pantheon here is the image of Guru Drakpo (the Wrathful Guru), placed immediately below the central figure. This early form of the fierce deity aspect of the master is usually not part of the Eight Manifestations and, interestingly, is here placed separately from the set of eight. Notable also is the placement of the Tibetan emperor Tri Songdetsen (742–c. 800/755–97) in the lower register, third from left. As stated in Padmasambhava's biographies, it was at Tri Songdetsen's invitation that the master came to Tibet to help establish Buddhism in his empire, and the Emperor was one of Padmasambhava's main disciples.

The verso of the painting has an extensive inscription written in cursive script within the outline of a stupa. It contains the so-called 'forbearance verse' (from chapter 14 of the *Dharmapada Sutra*), followed by prayers to Padmasambhava and the lineage teachers. Mentioned among the teachers' names are several famous masters associated with the Northern Treasure tradition: the *tertön* Rigdzin Chenpo, also known as Gödemchen (1337–1409); Thangtong Gyelpo (1361/65–1480/86), famous for his building activities and his iron bridges; and the latter's direct disciple Changsem Künga Nyima (15th century). This would suggest that the painting was created at the earliest in the later part of the 15th century or possibly the early 16th century, a dating that is corroborated by the painting's style. It is very tempting to assume that its commission was tied to the lineage of the Northern Treasure teachings, of which Gödemchen was the main revealer.

The other painting of Padmasambhava from the RRE Collection depicts the master surrounded by the Eight Manifestations (see Fig. 9). Here, he appears as a scholar wearing a scholar's, or *pandita's*, hat. The composition is set in a very finely painted green-blue landscape filled with details of caves, animals, and figures related to the episodes of Padmasambhava's life in which he was given the names associated with the Eight Manifestations. These various aspects of the master are arranged around the central figure in their usual pairings: Tsokyé Dorje, or Orgyen Dorje Chang (upper left), and Péma Jungné (Padmasambhava) (upper right); Loden Choksé (centre left) and Péma Gyelpo (centre right); Nyima Özer (lower left) and Shakya Sengé (lower right); and the two wrathful aspects, Sengé Dradok and Dorje Drolö (lower centre). It is notable that the painting also includes images of two Tibetan lamas depicted

as a pair just below the central figure. On the left is the famous treasure-revealer Lonchengpa (1308–64), here identified by his title 'The All-knowing Drimé Özer'. The teacher to his right is not identified by inscription, but a large dedicatory inscription on the painting's verso informs us that it was commissioned as a support for personal practice focused on the guru



Fig. 9 Padmasambhava
Tibet or Bhutan, 18th century
Pigments on cloth, 70 x 40 cm
RRE Collection, Switzerland
(presented for auction at Sotheby's, March 2018)
(Image courtesy of Sotheby's Inc. © 2018)

Padmasambhava for the use of Gyurme Chodrup Pelbar (1709–50), who was fifth in the incarnation lineage of the famous treasure-revealer Pema Lingpa (1450–1521). The inscription states that it was written by Kunzang Dorje (1680–1723), who was probably Gyurme Chodrup Pelbar's teacher and another of Pema Lingpa's incarnations (see Buddhist Digital Resource Center, P662). The inscription, along with the stylistic features of the painting, suggests that it may have been created in Bhutan, in which case it is one of the finest examples of Bhutanese painting in existence today.

These examples of artworks made to celebrate Padmasambhava represent just a fraction of the diverse and rich visual culture focused on this master and his legacy. Many such artistic treasures are still unknown and await discovery and further study.

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The works in Figures 2, 3, 4 and 6 are included in the exhibition 'The Second Buddha: Master of Time' at The Rubin Museum of Art.

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