# BUDDHISM

## YAMANTAKA MANDALA

**Yamantaka Mandala**
(Overcoming Death Mandala)

A mandala, or circle, is a representation of the Buddhist universe. These cosmograms represent in symbolic color, line, and geometric forms, all realms of existence and are used in Tantric meditation and initiation rites. The creation of a mandala, considered a consecrated area, is believed to benefit all beings.

This is the Yamantaka mandala, a cosmic blueprint of the celestial palace of the deity Yamantaka, Conqueror of Death, who is represented at the center by the blue vajra, or thunderbolt. It consists of a series of concentric bands, the outermost representing eight burial grounds with a recognizable landscape and animals symbolizing our earthly plane of existence. Moving inward are a circle of flames, a circle of *vajras*, and a circle of lotus petals. These bands circumscribe a quadrangle with gates at the four compass points, suggesting the realm of form without desire. The innermost square is divided into triangular quadrants, and an inner circle is subdivided into nine units containing symbols representing various deities. This is the realm of absolute formlessness and perfect bliss. In the four outside corners are the attributes of the five senses (smell, sight, sound, taste, and touch), reminders of the illusory nature of our perceived reality.

All mandalas represent an invitation to enter the Buddha's awakened mind. Tibetan Buddhists believe there is a seed of enlightenment in each person's mind; this is uncovered by visualizing and contemplating a mandala. The complex symbols and exquisite combination of primary colors are considered a pure expression of the principles of wisdom and compassion that underlie Tantric Buddhist philosophy.

This mandala was created to honor the 1.2 million Tibetans who have lost their lives to political/religious persecution during this century.The museum thanks the Tibetan American Foundation of Minnesota for bringing the Gyoto monks to Minnesota and for their efforts to preserve Tibetan cultural traditions.

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The Yamantaka Mandala—a cosmic blueprint of the palace of the Conqueror of Death—consists of a series of concentric bands. Roll over the image to uncover the meaning of this remarkable Tibetan sand painting.

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## Step By Step

### The Creation of the Yamantaka Mandala

### Preparation

- Asian art curator Robert Jacobsen invited Tibetan monks from the Gyuto Tantric University to create a sand mandala at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.
- Considering the fleeting nature of sand mandalas, museum officials wondered if it might be possible to make the mandala "permanent"—in the hopes of adding it to the museum's collection.
- The monks and their sponsors in Minnesota were in favor of the preservation idea, believing it would help tell their story to museum visitors.
- Jacobsen contacted locally based Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company (3M), to develop materials that could preserve the mandala.
- With intensive research, 3M discovered an ideal sand, permanent pigments, and an adhesive to bind it all together.
- A special supportive wooden platform was made to go underneath the mandala in preparation for its eventual vertical display.

- A gallery space at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts was made available for the creation of the mandala, and to allow the public to freely observe the event.

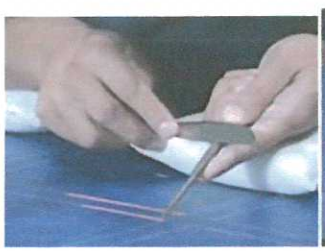
## Creation

- Tibetan monks from the Gyuto Tantric University in northern India arrived in Minnesota for the four-week project.

- A traditional opening ceremony took place at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

- From memory, the monks sketched an outline for the mandala on the wooden platform.

- Following the drawing, the pigmented sand provided by 3M was used to create the mandala. (Each monk holds a tool called a *chak-pur* in one hand, and runs a metal rod along its ribbed surface. The vibration causes the sand to flow out like a liquid.)



- Traditionally, after a mandala is completed, it is blessed with a final ceremony and then swept into the nearest body of water. In this case, there was a final ceremony and blessing, but the mandala was left intact for preservation.

# Preservation

- After the monks' work was finished, Al Silberstein and Edward Peterson, carpenters at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, worked for an additional four weeks to preserve the mandala.
- To harden the mandala and fix the sand, a resin—or adhesive—was applied. This was accomplished by surrounding the mandala with a high, makeshift tent. Then the resin was sprayed through a hole at the top of the tent, creating a fog.
- After the fog settled, the tent was removed and a scaffold was built over the mandala so Silberstein and Peterson could access any area.
- Eyedroppers filled with resin had to be used meticulously to completely seal any previously missed sections.
- Each night, infrared lights were used to bake the resin and further solidify the mandala.
- Unfortunately, after the resin treatment, the white sand became clear, since it did not contain any pigment. To remedy this situation, these areas were carefully painted.
- A specially formulated dark blue oil paint was used to cover the area surrounding the sand.
- Finally, the mandala was lifted up vertically, by hand. With virtually every grain of sand intact, it proved to be a successful preservation.

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***A Mandala for Minnesota***
By Kira Obolensky

**Preserved for the future, a Tibetan sand mandala defies time and gravity to become an artistic representation of a culture in peril**


Tibet has been called the roof of the world–indeed, this ancient kingdom is at such high altitude that the clouds float not in the sky but on the ground. So physically close to the heavens, it seems appropriate that Tibet should develop one of the world's most esoteric systems of spirituality.

Buddhism, an import from India, arrived in Tibet in 700 A.D. Based on the spiritual teachings of an Indian philosopher and teacher, it took hold in the remote mountain kingdom and melded with a local religion called Bon to become Tantric Buddhism. The religion penetrated all aspects of Tibetan daily life and culture, influencing everything from art to politics.

Until the 20th century, Tibet's ancient customs were preserved by its physical remoteness; its mystique filtered to the West through accounts written by poets or mountain climbers defying death on such prospects as Mount Everest. In 1950, the People's Liberation Army of China established Communist rule in the ancient theocracy. Tibet lost thousands of its magnificent temples and monasteries to the random destruction of China's so-called Cultural Revolution. Monks and nuns were slaughtered; approximately 1.6 million Tibetans were killed or imprisoned in forced labor camps. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and temporal ruler of Tibet, fled to northern India in 1959. Monastic groups took up worship and study in the provinces of northern India. An ancient system of thought and ritual was driven into permanent exile.

For this museum, the opportunity to witness an ancient and sacred aspect of Tibetan life came in the winter of 1991-92 when a group of monks from the Gyuto Tantric University in northern India arrived in the United States. Their mission was entirely in the Buddhist tradition—to educate people about their culture. The timing was not coincidental. Two hundred Tibetan heads of families would be resettling in Minnesota later in the year. The monks would help educate Minnesotans about Tibet's rich heritage and to its plight.

Robert Jacobsen, the curator of Asian art at the Institute, learned of their visit to Minnesota, he immediately recognized a tremendous opportunity for the museum. The monks had just been in San Francisco, where they had made a sand mandala at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Jacobsen knew that such an activity would generate a great deal of interest in Minnesota, and that it would function as an educational extension to an exhibition of Ch'ing dynasty imperial silks, which included Buddhist silks of Tibetan origin.

Made from sand, paint or even sculpted yak butter, mandalas are visual prayers, celestial renderings of Buddhist symbology. The painstaking process of making a mandala—literally grain by grain—is met at completion with a lesson on the impermanence of life. After it has been properly blessed, the mandala is traditionally swept up and deposited in the nearest body of flowing water.

When Tibet's precarious position in the world is considered, the mandala becomes a kind of rare species, high

on the list for extinction. Jacobsen, along with his friend Wynn Binger, a local engineer who is involved with the Tibetan community, began to speculate about how to preserve the mandala. They had heard that an attempt to preserve a sand mandala had been made in Japan. After contacting the gallery involved with that failed attempt, Jacobsen determined that the answer might be closer to home. In his words: "If 3M can't do it, then it isn't possible."

Binger, himself an engineer, enthusiastically agreed to act as a liaison between the monks and his contact at 3M, Warren Langstraat, the laboratory operations manager for the Construction Materials division. Langstraat, acting as a facilitator, put Binger in touch with Donald Williams, an engineer in product development, and George Tiers, a senior scientist. Tiers and Williams began an intensive search for the correct kind of sand, permanent pigments and an adhesive to bind it all together.

The sand traditionally used in mandalas is made from crushed limestone, which provides a particle that is fine enough for exquisite detail. The problem with using the crushed limestone in the Minnesota mandala was that it would not hold a permanent pigment, necessary to withstand both light and the eventual onslaught of an adhesive. In the end, scientist George Tiers discovered a silicate particle perfect to the task in an unlikely place: asphalt shingles. The same technologies used to create the colored roofs for American suburban development were put to a more esoteric test: could they hold pigment, and would the color meet with the monk's aesthetic approval?

In a kind of scientific relay race, Tiers handed the silicate particle to Donald Williams, who began to experiment with bonding synthetic pigments by firing them at high temperatures. Williams's role was critical: he essentially created the palette, a range of ten basic colors which could be thinned with white sand to create the full spectrum.

By the time the monks took up residence in the museum, the materials and the method were in place. After a ceremony blessing the space, the monks began to draw a blueprint for this rendering of the schematic diagram of the Buddhist cosmos. The monks determined to make a mandala dedicated to Yamantaka, the lord of death. A mandala is essentially a diagram for the Buddhist hierarchy. Yamantaka, rendered as an abstract symbol, occupies the central position. He is surrounded by four celestial gates, which mark the cardinal directions. Various aspects of spiritual and human existence ring the celestial palace, ranked from the sacred to the profane.

There is no artistic ego at work in the creation of a mandala. Each monk might have a specialty, but this unique artistic event is ultimately a collaboration. The Gyuto monks worked for four weeks on the Yamantaka mandala. The monks marked its completion with a consecration, and then the mandala, though a sacred object, became once again the province of science.

Curator Jacobsen and Binger had been experimenting with spraying small sand paintings with adhesive. The sand surface is so delicate it shows the tracks of an insect, and Jacobsen discovered that the adhesive, when it is applied in too thick of a stream, pitted the sand. A fine mist of adhesive was in order, and Institute facilities staff Al Silberstein and Ed Peterson began to construct a tent over the mandala to contain the spray. The initial spraying was a success—the adhesive hardened the sand, bonded it to the base and dried without leaving a shiny surface. But all of the three-dimensional surfaces needed more glue. At this point, Ed and Al (both artists themselves) took to the surfaces with an eyedropper, meticulously reinforcing the initial layer of adhesive.

Beginning June 6, 1992, the sand mandala defied both gravity and time. Featured in an exhibition, "In the Shadow of Everest: Buddhist Art of the Himalayas," a sand mandala was hung like a painting on the wall for the first time. This extraordinary event became an artistic representation of a culture in peril.