

The real secrets around Himalayan art surround those who collect it

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Two publications offer a window into the workings of Himalayan art collections in the West - where the buyers and sellers are more mysterious than the esoteric artefacts they trade in

Other people's secrets are especially interesting. Their content hardly matters. Rather, the draw is the feeling of power that comes from knowing something that someone else did not want us to know. You hold the key, even if you have no interest in going through the door it unlocks. At least, this is how I understand the appeal of Tantric Buddhist and Hindu artefacts to many Western collectors. These artefacts are esoteric: meant to be interpreted one way by most people, but in a very different way by initiates who can read their hidden meanings. For example, you may see a *yab-yum* image as a merely erotic representation of sexual intercourse unless you know it symbolises the union of action and wisdom necessary to achieve enlightenment.

Once, these interpretations were passed down from teachers to students within religious traditions. Now, they have been revealed by a century of published scholarship. Still, mystery continues to surround the esoteric artefacts of Himalayan cultures. But today, the secrets have to do not with the artefacts themselves, but with those who buy and sell them. In this review, I offer myself as a guide to the hidden meanings of two characteristic publications in the field, one a survey of Himalayan art and the other a catalogue of an American private collection.

Project Himalayan Art is composed of a digital platform, a book titled *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, and a travelling exhibition. The project was launched by the Rubin Museum in New York City, which subsequently announced that it will close its physical space and become a museum without walls, lending its collection of Himalayan art to other institutions.

As Jorrit Britschgi, the Rubin's executive director, writes in the book's preface, Project Himalayan Art aims to remedy the "under-representation of Himalayan art" in college curricula, which the organisers believe is "due in large part to the lack of introductory resources for teaching." Britschgi notes that the decision to structure the project around a limited number of artefacts necessarily "entails omissions". He hopes that the digital platform will grow to cover more topics, including "contemporary art, cultural activism, colonialism, and issues of provenance."

The project thus prioritises users in need of "introductory resources" over members of Himalayan communities, for whom the excluded topics are probably more interesting. But it is not that topics like provenance and colonialism are totally absent from the project. Rather, it is that the contributors have already made their own decisions about them.

One key sign of this is the focus on artefacts in collections outside the Himalaya. Some of the 108 entries in the project cover buildings, wall paintings or monumental sculptures that remain where they were made. Others describe movable artefacts such as manuscripts and paintings on cloth. Of

these portable artefacts, 23 are in sites or museums in the Himalayan region, while 48 – more than twice as many – are now in foreign collections. Most of these are in museums, but seven are in private collections. Some of these objects, like a portable amulet box purchased in Kathmandu in the first decades of the 21st century, are unproblematically sold and exported. But the others are historic cultural artefacts of the type whose export has long been banned from countries in the region. If left in place, they would still have been part of a living cultural heritage. One example is a stone sculpture of the Tantric Buddhist mystic Padmasambhava, a key figure in the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, which was carved perhaps in the late 13th century and which is now in Switzerland's Fondation Alain Bordier, a private museum owned by a collector with ties to the [trafficking](#) of cultural heritage.

It can sometimes be difficult to know whether an artefact was something sacred or something whose sale to a foreign collector was permissible. But the project does not help us understand such distinctions. Consider, for example, a 19th-century ritual dance mask from southern Tibet or Bhutan representing Guru Dorje Drolö, a manifestation of Padmasambhava. The entry for it offers an admirable introduction to how such masks were made and used. The author reminds us that the “mask is not a work of art in the Western sense, but an object of devotion,” and tells us that believers in Bhutan today still attend dances involving such masks, or watch them live on television, and pray while looking on. But would the communities that made them have sold the masks used in such rituals? I do not know, and the entry does not discuss how the mask left its community or how it ended up in the collection of its current owner, Bruce Miller.

While I may not know much about ritual dance masks, I do know a fair amount about [Bruce Miller](#). I know that he has made a fortune selling Himalayan antiquities. I know that he is married to Jane Casey, a scholar of Himalayan art who has written at least three catalogues for Rossi & Rossi, dealers of Asian antiquities – who, as the book's acknowledgements reveal, provided “major support” for Project Himalayan Art. (Casey has also written for the project.) And I know that Miller obtained a necklace shortly after it had been stolen from the Taleju Bhawani Temple in Kathmandu, selling it to private collectors who then donated it to the Art Institute of Chicago.

The necklace remains the subject of an ongoing repatriation claim – one of many that Nepalis have launched in recent years. Aided by a civilian activist group, the Nepal Heritage Recovery Campaign, Nepali authorities have recovered artefacts from the Metropolitan Museum (in 2018, 2022 and 2023), the Brooklyn Museum (in 2023), and the Rubin Museum itself (in 2022 and 2023). And that's just the cases involving institutions in New York City.

Certainly, just because a person has dealt in one stolen artefact does not prove that everything else that has passed through their hands is suspect. But I think that a history of such activity does require acknowledgement. Hopefully, the organisers of this project asked for and received reassurance that Miller's dance mask was not stolen before they highlighted it in a way certain to increase its value on the market. I hope the same is true of all the loans Miller has made to exhibitions at the Rubin Museum. (I emailed the museum to ask but did not receive a reply.) But I would also like for the project to tell the reader that it exercised this caution about provenance. Without such explicit caveats, the inclusion of Miller's mask acts as an endorsement of the quality, legality and ethical status of his entire collection.

Putting these ethical issues aside, I believe the project would have better met its own goal of explaining Himalayan art to new audiences by using artefacts that remain in their original contexts. Anyone can look at objects and decide for themselves whether they find them beautiful or visually interesting. As an art historian, I teach my students about what they cannot see for themselves, including who used an artefact, for what purposes, and what roles such artefacts continue to play today. The project wonderfully elucidates such things for artefacts like the Jowo Shakyamuni statue

at the Jokhang temple in Lhasa and an image of Bunga Dya, or Machhendranath, that travels between temples in Bungamati and Patan in the Kathmandu Valley. Thanks to the rich information offered by their context and worshippers, readers unfamiliar with these objects can still understand their significance to past and present Himalayan communities. By contrast, many Himalayan objects now in foreign collections can only be described with guesses: perhaps this type of person commissioned it; perhaps they used it for this type of purpose; perhaps they used it in a monastery, but we don't know where.

There is a third category of description, falling between knowledge and speculation, for artefacts that appear on the art market without any information about their original context but whose provenance which can be understood because of their similarity to other artefacts that remain in use. Such vampire artefacts, as I call them, cannot contribute to our understanding of Himalayan culture. Only by drawing meaning from similar objects still in use can the vampire artefact come back to a sort of life.

For example, one of the essays in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects* describes a late-12th- or early-13th-century statue of Vasudhara, the Buddhist goddess of prosperity, now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Her form in the Kathmandu Valley, the historical home of the Newar people, has been consistent since the 11th century, as have the rituals in which she is worshipped. The entry uses a contemporary photograph and an 18th-century painting to explain these rituals, when Newar women dressed in yellow to affirm their connection to this golden goddess, asking her for an abundant rice harvest.

Without knowledge of such cultural practices, we would not know how to interpret the sculpture, since we do not know where this particular Vasundhara was before she appeared in a 1966 exhibition of the collection of Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck, well-known dealers of Asian art and antiquities. Why, in a book that is supposed to educate audiences about cultural traditions, would a vampire artefact be chosen as the one to lead an entry?

The Heeramanecks sold at least two Vasudhara sculptures. Besides the one now in Los Angeles, they once possessed a 15th-century gilt bronze Vasudhara, which reappeared at an auction in 2016 only to disappear once more, presumably into a private collection. The history of looting is sometimes excused by the beneficial effects of the dissemination of cultural artefacts around the world – but an artefact in a collector's living room is more hidden than it ever was in a Himalayan shrine.

Some collectors do let us peek into their living rooms. One collection was revealed by the self-published 2022 book *Deities Unveiled: Himalayan Art from the Collection of Dr. John N. Loomis*. In his preface, Loomis even reveals the origins of his interest in Tantric sculpture, writing about his childhood in a small town in Texas where his mother “spent a great deal of time in her bedroom, reading religious and spiritual tracts, especially those centered on the Hindu religion.” Perhaps the sculptures he collected act like substitutes for his absent mother.

Normally, I would disdain such efforts to speculate about the hidden workings of someone else's soul. But I will make an exception for Loomis, because he goes on to write that when a dealer brings him a sculpture, he listens to see if it speaks to him. If it does, he does no research before purchasing it, since he is confident that “whatever I needed to know about it would eventually make itself known.”

In [my research](#) into the motivations of private collectors, I have often seen similar attitudes held by collectors of antiquities from long-dead cultures. But it remains shocking to hear such explicit disinterest in anything a member of a living culture might have to say about one of their artefacts – especially since Loomis is perfectly aware that in their original context the sculptures he purchases

were “sacred pieces”, and all the more so when some of them still “have prayers sealed inside, or holy ashes”. Loomis’ contemplation of these sculptures becomes a parody of the meditative tradition for which they were created. Instead of using them as aids to carry out the steps of a traditional teaching, he buys sculptures to achieve his own personal goals, gaining benefits that cannot be shared with others

I’m not arguing that it is improper or unethical to use an artefact for a personal goal that has nothing to do with the use for which it was originally made. The ethical question here is whether that use precludes others. Locked in Loomis’ apartment in New York, these sculptures can no longer be used by Himalayan communities. A prominent American scholar of Buddhism who contributed an essay to the book suggests that this is justified, since Loomis’ affinity for Himalayan art is due to “experiences and attainments in former lives.” The scholar goes on to claim that the “live divine presences” in Loomis’ sculptures “have clearly been drawn to him as he to them.” The implication is that these deities are the ones responsible for smuggling their sculptures out of the Himalaya and into the hands of dealers and collectors. Apparently, the communities they left behind were not as drawn to them as Loomis is.

Loomis thanks Carlton Rochell, a prolific dealer in Himalayan cultural heritage, for selling him treasures and for overseeing the publication of this book. The catalogue entries were written by an American researcher who has also produced two catalogues for the Kapoor Galleries, a New York City dealership of antiquities from India and the Himalaya, and now sells Himalayan art at the auction house Sotheby’s. The scholarly but adulatory entries for the artefacts in the book read like descriptions in a high-end auction. One piece is called “exceptional,” “dazzling,” and “spectacular”; another an “incredibly unique, elegant, and masterfully crafted image” that has a “perfect countenance.” I suspect that Rochell did not take on the task of shepherding the book to publication out of the pure goodness of his heart, but rather as the first step in preparing the collection for sale.

Loomis’ book explicates the hidden meanings of his Tantric sculptures. But many secrets still remain. Most of these artefacts have never before appeared in publication, but the book reveals nothing about how they were acquired by dealers or when and how they left their communities of origin. Unlike the secrets of Tantric images, now open to the world, the secrets of collectors and dealers are still revealed only to the smallest circles of faithful disciples.

I cannot penetrate these ultimate mysteries. But at least I can point out the shape such secrets take within these publications. In the 18th and 19th centuries, European museums displayed cultural artefacts from Africa, Asia and South America to demonstrate the “primitive” nature of peoples whose territory was targeted for colonisation – supposedly for their benefit, as they would gain from contact with higher culture. In the 20th century, many of these artefacts came to be perceived in a very different way: as shining examples of “purer” non-Western cultures. But the middlemen who supplied collectors and museums made just as much money [stealing artefacts](#) whether they were needed to support disparagement or adulation.

I cannot say if there is a world beyond the visible one, inhabited by deities like Vasudhara who can influence our fortunes. But I do know that Western publications and exhibitions of Himalayan cultural property are merely the visible manifestations of a whole universe of money, power, crime and loss.

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