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The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan

Honolulu Academy of Arts

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This catalogue accompanies The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Arts of Bhutan, one of the most highly anticipated exhibitions of Buddhist art to be held in recent times. For over five years, the Honolulu Academy of Arts, under the direction of Dr. Stephen Little, has conducted ambitious fieldwork and research in Bhutan. Enjoying a close working relationship with the Royal Government of Bhutan, the Honolulu Academy of Arts research teams have been given unprecedented access to the nation s treasuries of sacred art and dance.

The Dragon's Gift offers a rare opportunity to introduce, to the wider international audience, some of the most sacred Buddhist images of Bhutan. From the wealth of material surveyed, the organizers of the exhibition have selected over one hundred objects of superior aesthetic achievement and deep religious significance, the vast majority of which have never before been seen in the West. Nearly all of the works of art presented in this catalogue are from active temples and monasteries and remain in ritual use. Most of the items are painted or textile thangkas or gilt bronze sculptures which date primarily from the 17th to the 19th centuries a golden age in the Buddhist arts of Bhutan. Ranging from depictions of Tantric deities to individualized portraits of Buddhist masters, the exhibition and catalogue present outstanding works of art with a wide iconographic scope. For the Buddhist people of Bhutan, these sacred items are conceived as supports along the journey to enlightenment, and are of vital spiritual significance.

Complementing the presentation of sacred works of art is the documentation of the ancient Cham dances of Bhutan, to which the dance preservation team was given privileged entrée. Having documented over three hundred hours of sacred and secular dances, they have made a first assay of one of the few surviving treasures of the trans-Himalayan movement tradition. These differing approaches to the visual and moving arts provide further insight into the unique experience of Buddhism in Bhutan. A brief sampling of the variety of extant dance lineages some many centuries old is included on the DVD contained within the catalogue.

Beautifully illustrated, the catalogue also includes twelve essays contributed by leading Bhutanese and Western scholars, covering various aspects of the Bhutanese arts. Contributors include: Dr. Stephen Little, Ven. Lopon Pemala, Ven. Khenpo Phuntsok Tashi, Terese Tse Bartholomew, John Johnston, Dr. Karma Phuntsho, Dr. David Jackson, Dr. John A. Ardussi, Dr. Yonten Dargye, Dr. Per K. Soerensen, Dorji Yangki, Ephraim Jose, Mark Fenn, and Joseph Houseal.

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