

PILGRIMAGE

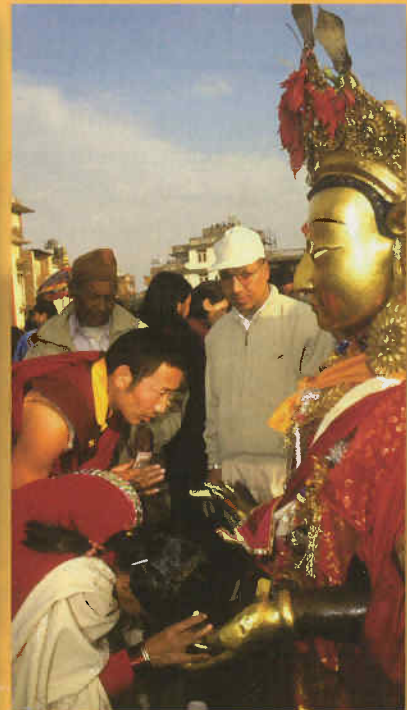
Buddhism
Christianity
Islam

FAITH

CURATED BY

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Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Art Gallery, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts
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University of Richmond Art Museums, Richmond, Virginia
Rubin Museum of Art, New York, New York

IMAGES:

Hajj; Arafat, 1974. Photo S. M. Amin /Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA
Scala Santa (Holy Stairs) Rome, 2009. Photo Michel Raguin
Buddhist festival in Kathmandu, Nepal, 2003. Photo Dina Bangdel

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INTRODUCTION

This exhibition focuses on fundamental issues of the three religions and the many ways their practices converge in the pilgrimage experience. The pilgrim's goal is the holy site; to approach it involves both physical and temporal expense, beginning through detachment from the familiar. The hoped-for result is the acquisition of humility, acknowledging the smallness of the self and the greatness of the divine. Paramount is the injunction to exercise charity to others and also in humility to accept charity from others.

Although often rare and beautiful, art also functions as a vital part of social systems that cement the bonds of community, as well as supporting the role of religion in transcending human limitations. All three religions display a deeply felt motivation to affect the life of the believer through transformative experience, frequently involving art. All structure an intersection of the individual with both natural and built environments, ritualized behavior, and tangible objects. This tangible object may range from a bejeweled statue venerated at a national shrine to the commonly available chromolithograph. Pilgrimage ultimately creates a liminal situation within which the believer is neither in the realm of the ordinary nor yet within the sacred.

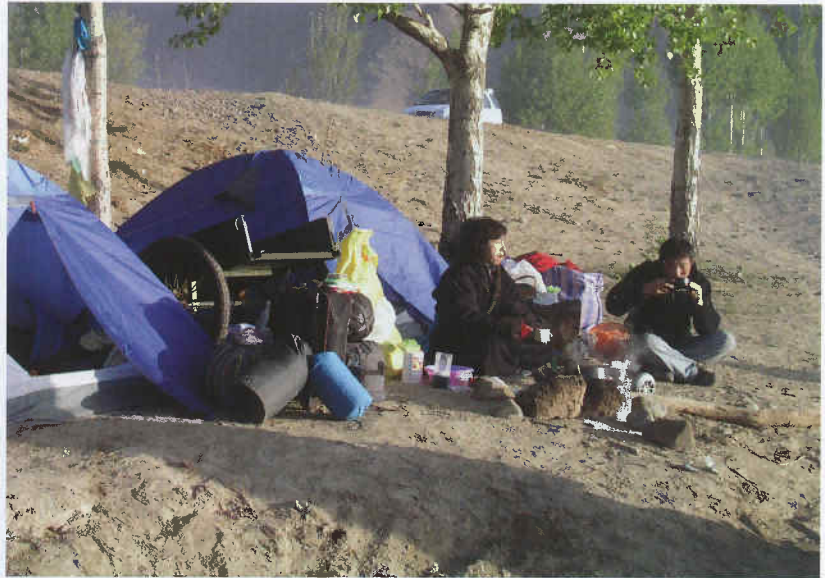
The juxtaposition of religions whose beliefs and practices are so often seen as incompatible reveals profound similarities. Participants on pilgrimages saw objects of supreme artistic skill (Islamic glazed tile, Christian enameled reliquaries, or Buddhist bronze statues) mingled with mass-produced objects (lead pilgrimage badges, terracotta souvenirs; or paper mementos) and personal acquisitions such as stones or soil from the holy place. Such objects make more tangible the ephemeral experience and thus enable the owner to intensify memories of spiritual commitment and social interaction.



Tsa Tsa of Guru Rinpoche
Tibet, 19th - 20th century
Clay; 2-3/4 x 1-7/8 in.

The Newark Museum, Gift of Mr. Leo LeBon 1982, 82.207 F2

The practices of Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims testify to a desire to believe in the sacred made more accessible at a holy place. This vital sacred power or blessing is known to Tibetan Buddhists as chinlab (*byin rlabs*). Early Christian tombs of saints were seen as possessing *praesentia*, the physical presence of the holy. Charity to the pilgrim can be seen as sharing the sacred power, the holy. For Muslims, charity is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, and acts of charity are imbedded in the *hajj* ritual, with the slaughter of animals whose meat is then distributed



Pilgrimage in Tibet from Nyethang to Samye, 2007
Photo © Krisadawan Hongladarom

to the poor. In Tibet, Buddhist pilgrims can receive well wishes and material help in the form of food and money from many people, including Han Chinese and Westerners.

A pilgrim seeks to purify, connecting the inner process with the exterior physicality, especially ascent and circumambulation. Most pilgrimages involve long days of journey across often arduous terrain. But even with the goal attained, Buddhists circumambulate many times the sacred objects such as a temple, a stupa or even an entire monastery; Christians climb the stairs to embrace the statue of St. James in Compostela; and Muslims circumambulate the Ka'ba. Pilgrims often wear special dress, such as a white coat in Japan decorated with stamps from the temples visited, or carry amulets: prayer scrolls rolled within cylinders worn in Iran, a Tibetan Gau with its small objects of blessing and memory, and Christian pilgrimage badges. These tangible manifestations of commitment are directed inward as much as outward. We are fragile beings; our attention wavers and our energy fails. Reminders are necessary, whether attention to scheduled hours of prayer, communal hearing, or recitation of holy texts, or the wearing of a particular form of dress or adornment, all serve to focus purpose.



Pilgrimage on the Camino of Santiago, 2008
Photo Virginia Raguin

BUDDHIST PILGRIMAGE

And they, Ananda, who shall die while they, with believing heart, are journeying on such pilgrimage, shall be reborn after death, when the body shall dissolve, in the happy realms of heaven."

Mahaparinirvana Sutra, Ch.IV, 140.

As the world's fourth largest religion with more than 350 million followers, Buddhism's foundational creeds are non-violence (*ahimsa*) and the development of the qualities of loving kindness (*maitri*), altruistic compassion (*karuna*), and wisdom (*prajna*). These basic tenets of Buddhism were taught by its founder Shakyamuni Buddha, who himself was an ordinary mortal, born as a prince in 5th century BCE India who attained enlightenment (*bodhi*) through rigorous meditation and self-transformation. For Buddhist practitioners, Shakyamuni's life serves as a paradigm of this spiritual path, that full awakening is accessible to every living being, and enlightenment may be attained anywhere, anytime, through any method, as long as it is vigorously pursued. Hence, pilgrimage to the sacred places associated with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni becomes one of the most visible and enduring expressions of religious practice throughout the Buddhist world.

Woman with prayer wheel at Jokhang Temple
Lhasa, Tibet, 2006
Photo Luca Galuzzi - www.galuzzi.it



Mahabodhi Temple
Bodhgaya, India
Photo Dina Bangdel



Called *tirtha yatra* in Sanskrit, “a journey to the ford/crossing,” Buddhist pilgrimage serves as a means to accrue merit and as an act of purifying the physical body through the sacred journey. The goal of Buddhist pilgrimage then is to profoundly change the practitioner through the transformative experience, both mental and physical. Art supports the ritual of pilgrimage as the engagement of a journey, the acts of merit-making, charity and alms-giving during the process and beyond, sacred viewing at the site, and construction of memory through ephemera.

From the earliest literary reference as indicated by the quote above, India was the sacred land for Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. From as early as the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha (c. 563- 483 BCE), pilgrimage to India, the birthplace of the religion, naturally became the center of the Buddhist pilgrimage tradition. Sites related to the major events of the Buddha’s life, known as the Eight Great Sites of Wonder (*Astamahapratiharya*), lie at the core of all Buddhist pilgrimage. These include the place of his birth at Lumbini, his enlightenment at Bodhgaya, India, his first Sermon at Sarnath, and his death at Kushinagara and the sites associated with his four great miraculous events. The earliest art of Buddhism, from as early as the 1st century BCE, represents the visual narratives of pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition highlights the centrality of relics and their power. Because being in the presence of a relic and taking *darsan* (“sacred viewing”) of relics accrues merit, visiting the sites where relics are found is a principal impetus for pilgrimage in Buddhism. Sites associated with the physical relics (e.g., a tooth, a hair, or ashes from cremation) of the historical Buddha and relics by association (e.g., places made sacred by his presence, or a bowl or robe used by the Buddha) therefore map the sacred Buddhist landscape of India. A third category of relics is consecrated paintings or sculptures, which serve as reminders of the sacred sites. The objects associated with this relic category include not only art works of high artistic skill and materials such as gold, silver, silk or bronze, but also ephemeral objects of paper and clay that embody the experience and power of pilgrimage for the practitioner.

Buddhist practice has supported the re-creation of surrogate pilgrimage sites. In regions far from the Buddhist sacred center of India where there was little possibility of visiting the core sacred sites of Buddhism, Indian sacred sites were frequently re-created. This symbolic reconstruction created surrogate pilgrimage sites and produced a localized sacred geography and landscape. Many among these are associated with the natural world as the tangible expressions of the sacred in the natural world. These surrogate sites were often found in beautiful natural settings in distant places, where the rigors of travel became central to the pilgrimage experience. The remote Mt. Kailash in northwest Tibet, considered the center of the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and Bon world systems, is one such sacred place. Ritual circumambulation around the base of the 22,000 foot mountain is a merit-making activity that takes four days. Indeed, in Tibet a Buddhist pilgrim is often described as a person who goes around a sacred place. These journeys reinforce the conception of the physical landscape as sacred.



Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion,
Tibet, 2nd half of the 13th century
The Newark Museum, Purchase 1979
The Members’ Fund, 79.442
Photo The Newark Museum

