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COURTESY OF SHUZO UEMOTO / HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS

John Johnston and his assistant, Sonam Drugyel, take a break from looking at thangkas and sculptures at Tango Monastery.

# Bhutan's sacred treasures

**"The Dragon's Gift" includes ancient pieces actively used in the old kingdom's Buddhist monasteries**

By **Joleen Oshiro**  
[joshiro@starbulletin.com](mailto:joshiro@starbulletin.com)

Time might not be a luxury we all can afford, but in the case of "The Dragon's Gift: The Sacred Art of Bhutan," time -- and lots of it -- was integral to the caliber of the groundbreaking exhibition.

"Because the art of Bhutan is so poorly published, ours is the first attempt at presenting the kingdom's

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art history," says Stephen Little, director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts, which organized the exhibit over a five-year period beginning in 2003. "When we started, we didn't know what would be in the show. We didn't know what was there. We were starting from scratch."

Little admits it was a risky way to put a show together, so his team -- "Dragon's Gift" curator Terese Tse Bartholomew, Buddhist content adviser Reda Sobky and assistant curator John Johnston -- began by creating a conceptual skeleton of what they wanted to exhibit.

"The task was to find works of art that illustrated the concepts," he says.

Upon reaching an agreement with the royal government of Bhutan and the Central Monastic Body, the team was allowed access to the Department of Culture's photographic archive of cultural properties, from which they initially selected several thousand works -- narrowing it down to 500. The final count in the show is about 110 pieces.

In 2004, Johnston relocated to Bhutan, where Little had rented several apartments and opened a field office. Johnston spent about a year learning Dzongkha, the kingdom's official language, and then went into the field to find and record prospective pieces from the more than 2,000 temples across the kingdom. His proficiency in Dzongkha enabled him to negotiate with the individual monasteries that had final say on whether a work could make the journey to Hawaii.

"Since there's no tradition of arts history in Bhutan, all the pieces are actively used in rituals. Art is perceived in that perspective in Bhutan," Johnston explains.

As such, handing over sacred artwork was a weighty matter for the monks and lay folk assigned as caretakers to the pieces.

Johnston kept a tight schedule and traveled to nearly all parts of the kingdom. An enthusiasm for long, arduous hikes to remote temples and a resilience amid rugged conditions carried him through. His experience at Sotheby's in New York in the 1990s didn't hurt, either.

"Working at the auction house taught me how to examine a large number of works of art in a very short period of time. The experience was helpful when I visited temples and sometimes had just a few hours to review large treasuries," Johnston says.

While out in the field and upon recommendations from monks he met in his travels, Johnston would

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also come into contact with pieces not on the list.

"I always went out without any expectations," he says, and sometimes would visit temple upon temple and come away with nothing suitable. At other times he discovered "amazing treasures."

Little says that because the exhibit came together "in a natural, unplanned way," the art Johnston discovered would often challenge the original conceptual structure.

"In finding art to fill a niche, sometimes the niche would move," he says. "It was a great way, a really, really exciting way to put a show together. We needed to have the luxury to shift gears, and it's a better show for that."

By April 2006 the body of work for "The Dragon's Gift" was starting to take shape, so the team organized an iconography workshop, which brought together 13 Bhutanese experts in art, history and Buddhist studies, including monks, painters, sculptors and scholars. They worked to identify figures in the artwork and explain their relevance to Buddhism. It was a huge job.

"Sometimes there'd be 100 figures in just one painting," Little says. "And for each image they tracked down the liturgical source."



PADMASAMBHAVA AS GURU DORJE  
DROL LATE 17TH CENTURY  
Ink and mineral colors on cotton,  
part of a set of three paintings kept  
in the Trashich Dzong (temple) in  
Thimphu, depict the life of Guru  
Rinpoche. The action and objects  
in the scene symbolize the

close in Sept. for  
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inseparability of emptiness and  
compassion.

IN EXCHANGE for the assistance of the Bhutanese, the academy started two programs there. One was training in conservation led by Ephraim Jose, Asian painting conservator at the academy, and Mark Fenn, objects conservator at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, who worked with monks both in Bhutan and in Hawaii on conserving their ancient artwork.

The other program documented Bhutanese dance, which is intimately connected to spirituality and art. For that gift, Little relied on Joseph Houseal, executive director of Core of Culture Dance Preservation, a Chicago nonprofit. "Joseph documented almost every major dance in Bhutan with more than 300 hours of high-definition video," Little raves.

The archive will be donated to the royal government of Bhutan and a copy sent to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

Little's focus on Bhutanese dance was due to its significance in the kingdom's sacred art. It's not possible to grasp the scope of Bhutanese art without understanding the connection between spirituality, visual art and dance, he says. "Dance is done as a ritual. Monks prepare for a week with meditation and visualization. It's not a theatrical performance."

Little and Houseal believe "The Dragon's Gift" is the first worldwide exhibit to pair dance presentation with visual arts. Video screens will show footage of the dances, with paintings of dancing deities hanging nearby. This "informs the experience of seeing the exhibition," Little says. "I want the audience to think of movement as something that transmits identity, culture and cosmology."



COURTESY OF SHUZO UEMOTO / HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS  
The Future Buddha Maitreya, 17th century. From Phajoding Gmpa, Thimphu, of gilt copper, cold gold, pigments, and turquoise.

HAVING invested five years' hard work and untold dollars in "The Dragon's Gift," the academy will benefit in the form of international exposure, Little says. The show will travel to New York, San Francisco and two or three international cities.

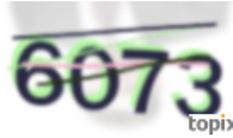
"It's time to project our identity beyond the Pacific," he says. "We're able to do things here because of our locale, and that's a real gift. This Bhutan show is a good example of that."

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