

# Curating the Sacred: Exhibiting Buddhism at the World Museum Liverpool

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores issues involved in representing Buddhism in museums, drawing on the author's experience of curating the Buddhism display at the World Museum Liverpool. It is concerned with processes of de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation, focussing on whether sacred images become divested of their religious functions once they enter a museum or if, instead, the gallery can be considered an alternative arena for contemplation.

The article begins by reviewing the literature on museums and the sacred. It discusses the lack of concern historically for religion in museums, noting how sacred objects have tended to be 'secularised' in exhibitionary contexts. It then examines the Buddhism display at the World Museum Liverpool, part of the permanent World Cultures gallery which opened in 2005, with its reconstructions of a shrine, an altar and a protective chapel – this is a museological environment which deliberately evokes the atmosphere of a temple.

## Keywords

museums, religion, Buddhist displays, World Museum Liverpool

## Museums and sacred sites

The relationship between museums and the sacred has, over the past few years, developed into a rich area of academic research,<sup>1</sup> and the issues surrounding the representation of Buddhist objects in museums, in particular, have been addressed by a number of authors.<sup>2</sup> For several decades now, the similarities between Western museums and religious/sacred buildings have been remarked upon in the literature.<sup>3</sup> Indeed as far back as the early 1990s, museologists, such as Michael Ames (1992, 21–24), identified affinities between the cathedrals of the European Middle Ages and the modern civic museum, both of which, he noted, could be considered public temples which serve to enshrine cultural treasures.

As is now well established, museums and sacred buildings share architectural features which are reminiscent of each other. Most notably, Carol Duncan (1995, 9–10) highlighted the Greek revivalist style as one of the key models for museums for the past two hundred years – and how, with their porticos, columns, steps and ornamentation, the temple-like façades of nineteenth-century museums were intended to demonstrate the civility of the state and reproduce powers associated with the Classical world (see fig 1). Duncan argued, furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hughes 2009; Marshall 2015; Mathur and Singh 2015; Minucciani 2013; Orzech 2015; Paine 2000, 2013; Reeve 2012; Sullivan 2015. There is also the journal of *Material Religion* which addresses this topic.

<sup>2</sup> See: Clarke 2009, 2015; Durham 2015; Harris 2012; Jameson 2015; Macleod 2011; Sullivan 2015; Suzuki 2007, Wingfield 2010.

<sup>3</sup> See: Bourdieu and Darbel 1991; Duncan 1995; Kreps 2011; McEvelley 1986, Paine 2013.

that neo-classical museums do not simply imitate the appearance of temples: many institutions in fact operate, spatially, in a similar way to sacred buildings. With their elevated entrances, the need for ascent towards the entrance of a museum is a feature shared with other forms of sacred architecture around the world, height often marking a transition from the everyday to more reverential domains. Both religious and museum buildings may have clearly defined points of entry, functioning as markers between the world of the sacred and that of the secular. The boundaries, or what Duncan termed the 'liminal' spaces, beyond the doorways in museums – imposing entrance halls, atriums, orientation and circulation spaces – visually signify that the visitor is about to enter a special and segregated space (1995, 10–11).

As well as their grandiose facades, the internal spaces of museums are often carefully choreographed – the entrance halls, staircases, corridors, layout of the galleries, are cultural markers through which visitor conduct can be regulated and shaped. The windowless rooms, the emphasis on revering objects, placed up high, carefully lit, echo the interiors of many types of religious buildings. Indeed, Duncan famously suggested that the architecture and design of museums function as a spatial 'script' intended to be read in particular ways (1995, 1). Visitors in certain museums, she argued, experienced a form of civic 'ritual' (1995, 12). She noted how behaviour is constrained both in museums and sacred sites: running, loud talking, eating and drinking tend to be prohibited. In other words, visitors are in a state of receptivity, where silent concentration and contemplation is encouraged. One is supposed to leave, as Duncan noted, 'with a sense of enlightenment, or a feeling of having been spiritually nourished or restored' (1995, 13).

The 'museum effect' too was notably defined by Svetlana Alpers, as 'the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own' (1991, 27), and is acknowledged to be created through a series of conventional devices and visual technologies. Objects may be isolated, and visitors are distanced from things – by the glass case, the plinth, the red cordon – physical barriers which reinforce the idea of objects as untouchable and unattainable. This is often the case in religious spaces too, where rare and venerated things are on display, yet out of reach. The typical museum experience, for Duncan, is one of viewing images by sequence, as in a church (1995, 12): 'The museum setting, immaculately white and stripped of all distracting ornament, promotes this intense concentration' (Duncan 1995, 110). The 'white cube' is the most extreme museological form, with few windows and sometimes no natural light – a space removed from the outside world (McEvelley 1986, 8). The aura bestowed upon objects within museums, thus, is not so dissimilar to the potency attributed to sacred images in temples. It is now well recognised that much about museums – from external architecture to internal configuration of space – functions to enhance the power attached to the things inside.

### **Sacred objects in secular spaces<sup>4</sup>**

Despite this construction of 'reverential' environments around collections, however, it is evident that museums in fact operate, at a fundamental level, to *de-sanctify* objects once considered sacred. The modern museum emerged in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, defining itself in opposition to the 'irrational' perceptions of magical and wondrous objects in the sixteenth-seventeenth century cabinets of curiosities. The

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<sup>4</sup> This article was written before the book of the same title, edited by Bruce Sullivan was published.

museum of the Enlightenment period was predicated upon European ideas of rationality, order, logic and scientific classification. Western values of science or art have, since then, taken precedence over the religious or magical qualities of things. Even though, as we have seen, museum buildings may echo the features of sacred architecture, in reality they perform no sacred function. Museums neither consecrate objects, nor are they dedicated to deities. Rather, they are sites of *secular* ritual, which Duncan likened to, but kept distinct from, religious rituals.<sup>5</sup>

As a number of authors have noted, there is something of a dissonance, therefore, between the semiotics of the museum's architecture and spatial configurations and interpretations bestowed upon objects once inside. Sacred artefacts, after all, were never intended to be placed in these structures. Torn from their original contexts, they have been relocated in this particular, Western, ideological space, and thus are inevitably both de-contextualised and re-contextualised. It is evident that by removing objects from their temple, church, shrine or altar, and placing them in a museum, the functions such artefacts originally performed may be destroyed.<sup>6</sup> Yet the literature on the topic over the past few years has increasingly queried if religious objects are inevitably rendered inactive through the mechanisms of museum display, and has explored the extent to which objects in museums can still, in certain circumstances, be regarded as sacred.<sup>7</sup> Two of the key publications on the subject – Crispin Paine's, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (2013) and Bruce Sullivan's edited volume, *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (2015) – discuss the complex and multiple ways in which contemporary museums address these issues.<sup>8</sup>

As noted by Paine (2013), the past few decades have witnessed substantial changes in the culture of Western museums. Many museums have endeavoured to be more inclusive, with less strict proscription on visitor conduct. Some encourage activities that could be considered transgressive of the reverential rituals described by Duncan in the 1990s. The conservation and representation of sacred objects too has undergone change as part of wider shifts in curatorial practices. Above all, the post-colonial critique of the museum from the mid-1980s has led to increasing demands by source communities not merely for access to 'their' objects, but for greater involvement in how sacred things should be treated, both in store and on display.<sup>9</sup> Many museums now actively welcome community representatives performing ceremonies in the presence of sacred artefacts on display or in store, and some may even implement traditional/indigenous methods of conservation and

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan notes how our secular society, 'classifies religious buildings such as churches, temples and mosques as different in kind from secular sites such as museums, court houses, or state capitals' (1995, 7). Others too have highlighted the secular status of Western museums (Clarke 2015; Durham 2015; Marshall 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Gaskell notes: 'Once a sacred object has been removed to a secular space, its sacred qualities are often compromised. Indeed, in their emphasis on the aesthetic and the art-historical, art museums have proved to be very effective means of expunging the sacred qualities of objects' (2003, 150). See also Burman 2000, 134.

<sup>7</sup> Some, such as Arthur, questioned whether 'a living religion is somehow automatically destroyed as soon as it becomes an exhibit' (2000, 16). Gaskell too suggested that in museums the sacred qualities of objects can still come to the fore (2003, 150). See also Jameson 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan's introduction to the volume, *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces*, notes that the book problematises the idea that 'the museum necessarily elides all sacred qualities from objects its exhibits' (2015, 1). See also Durham 2015, 92, on this issue, and Wingfield's 2010 study of the ceremonies surrounding the Sultanganj Buddha at Birmingham Art Gallery & Museum.

<sup>9</sup> See: Clifford 1997; Paine 2013, Peers and Brown 2003.

care.<sup>10</sup> The encouragement of (sometimes) direct contact with collections breaks down physical boundaries, allowing aspects of objects beyond the visual to be appreciated. There is an increasing acceptance of multiple and radically different ways of perceiving non-Western material, an acknowledgement that, for example, ‘objects’ may not necessarily be *inanimate*, but be seen by some to have numinous qualities – spirit, energy or life force.<sup>11</sup>

This has gone hand-in-hand with other developments in the interpretation of material culture over past decades. The notion that artefacts have multiple and shifting meanings led to a range of research.<sup>12</sup> Here, the meanings of objects are not necessarily fixed, but may travel instead through different ‘regimes of value’ during the course of their lives (Kopytoff 1986): people endow objects with very different interpretations at different times depending on their backgrounds, perceptions and beliefs. While some may regard certain artefacts as sacred, others will consider them profane; some perceive the spaces in which objects are displayed as reverential, while others will attach no significance to them at all. Many Western museums increasingly encourage such a multiplicity of viewpoints around their collections (Paine 2013).

## Museums and religion

Despite the changes to museum practices discussed above, it is surprising that there are still so few galleries devoted specifically to religion. Mark O’Neill, in particular, noted how museums have barely acknowledged the distinctive character of religious collections and, as a result, sacred objects have traditionally been exhibited as artistic, anthropological or historical specimens (1999, 188).

Why has this come about? Firstly, there is the obvious difficulty of representing spirituality through the material world. Faith is not solid or concrete, and the subjective nature of personal belief and the metaphysical sense of religious experience pose complex challenges to display. Although many belief systems *do* have traditions of visual imagery, religions cannot be understood solely through ‘things’. It is far from straightforward, therefore, for curators to convey spiritual ideas in a museum space, to represent the intangible and non-material through the tangible and material. As Chris Arthur notes: ‘When it comes to exhibiting the sacred, a fundamental challenge is, quite simply, how do you picture the unpictureable; how do you mount a display about what, at root, is resistant to all forms of expression ...?’ (2000, 2). Furthermore, curators may be constrained by the artefacts available in their collections (Julian Spalding (1993, 5) cited in Arthur 2000, 8) and, more often than not, it may be simpler to focus on material qualities, art forms, or other aspects of the cultures from which objects originated.

Religion, as an epistemological category, has also been marginalised within museums due to the taxonomic systems which emerged in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, and which have tended to structure collecting practices even to this day. The result is that groupings of objects do not tend to be organised in relation to religious affiliation (O’Neill

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<sup>10</sup> For example, see Laura Peers’ pioneering work with Haida communities at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/haida.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See: Grimes 1992, 426; Kreps 2003, 92–93; Paine 2013, 4–10; Simpson 1996, 195.

<sup>12</sup> See: Ames 1992; Davis 1997; Gell 1998; Henare, 2005; Myers 2001; Thomas 1991. While Pomian wrote of artefacts as ‘bearers of meanings’ (1990), Hooper-Greenhill conceptualised them as ‘polysemic’ (2000), Henare referred to them as ‘vehicles of knowledge’ (2005, 66).

1999, 189).<sup>13</sup> Most museums in the West still administer collections according to the classifications established in the nineteenth century – ‘Ethnography’ for objects from Africa, the Americas, the Pacific and (sometimes) Asia; ‘Archaeology’ or ‘Antiquity’ for Greek, Roman, Egyptian collections; ‘Fine Art’ for Medieval and Renaissance religious paintings; ‘Decorative Art’ for Islamic and (sometimes) Asian objects; and the more recent classification of ‘Local History’ for objects from Jewish, Indian, Chinese and other local communities. The one museum in the UK which is entirely devoted to the topic, the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, indeed was conscious that ‘abandoning academic or material culture categories’ was one of the ‘principles which led to it becoming a museum of world religions ...’ (O’Neill 1999, 195).<sup>14</sup>

How then do Buddhist objects tend to be interpreted and classified in Western museums? It is clear that Buddhist artefacts are rarely identified as distinct collections, and there are no dedicated curators of Buddhist collections (at least in the UK). Despite this, there have been an increasing number of temporary exhibitions devoted to this religion since the 1980s. In 1985, for example, the ground-breaking show, ‘Buddhism: Art and Faith’, was held at the British Museum. A travelling exhibition, also from the British Museum, ‘Living Buddhism’, went on loan to Liverpool Museum in 1991. The major exhibition, ‘Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet’, was mounted at the Royal Academy the following year. In 1993, ‘Expressions of Enlightenment: a celebration of Buddhist Art’, was displayed at Manchester City Art Galleries, while ‘Bhutan: A Kingdom in Balance’ toured Europe from 1997 to 1998 – and there have, of course, been many more in the twenty-first century. Over the past decades museums have also included small sections devoted to Buddhism as part of their permanent displays: the Newark Museum’s Tibetan altar, consecrated by His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in 1990, is perhaps the most renowned (Paine 2013, 41), and also in the USA the Freer/Sackler Gallery in Washington D.C. displays the Alice Kandell Tibetan shrine acquired in 2011 (Clarke 2015, 76), and the Rubin Museum of Art in New York has long had a Shrine Room replicating a Tibetan sacred space. In France, the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet in Paris had an evocative display of Buddhist deity figures from China and Japan – the Panthéon Bouddhique. In Russia, the Museum of History of Religion in St Petersburg includes a room with an atmospheric reconstruction ‘The Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha,’<sup>15</sup> and there was a reconstructed Tibetan shrine in the Centenary Gallery at the Horniman Museum in London. However, it was still the case that, by the late twentieth century, no permanent Buddhist gallery existed in any UK museum (Chuang 1993, 163). The Buddhist display at the World Museum Liverpool, which opened in 2005, may thus have been one of the first of its kind in the country. Before examining this display in any detail, however, it is worth discussing briefly the particular qualities of Buddhist objects in order to better understand the difficulties associated with their exhibition in museums.

## **Buddhism and the museum**

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<sup>13</sup> The exception perhaps being Islam.

<sup>14</sup> See also Marshall 2015, 461–62, Orzech 2015, 140–143, and Paine 2013, 99, on the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art.

<sup>15</sup> See Paine 2013, 81–5, on the history of this institution and Orzech 2015, 138–39. The author also visited the display in August 2016.

Buddhist objects are an important point of contact with the religion: they may signify events in the life of the Buddha or sometimes provide a focus for meditational practices (Kieschnick 2003, 55). In the temple, however, deity figures are not 'things' to assess visually, as in a museum. While lay worshippers may stand and shake or waft incense in the direction of the images, they do not necessarily look at them in detail. Meditation may involve facing a deity-image, but this tends to be with eyes closed. Fundamentally, the purpose of Buddhist images is not one of aesthetics but is rather to facilitate the path to spiritual enlightenment.

In Buddhist traditions, cast or sculpted statues can come 'alive' by the introduction of sacred texts – and sometimes other precious objects – into a recess in their bodies, and by a ceremony known as 'opening of the eyes', performed with water and a brush.<sup>16</sup> Once consecrated, such deity figures are considered active and efficacious. Key components of Buddhist images in their original realm, therefore, are visibly inaccessible – the texts and objects in their interiors, and the spirit of the deity inhabiting them. In the museum, by contrast, Buddhist artefacts tend to be valued and interpreted predominantly in relation to their material or visible characteristics.

In a gallery, above all, things are viewed for their formal qualities – the plinth, the frame, the spotlight being some of the key museological devices deployed to influence the way people visually engage with things as 'art'.<sup>17</sup> Christopher Marshall notes the 'austere and intellectually detached visual emphasis that is frequently encountered in traditional art museum exhibitions' (2015, 460). Light shades tend to dominate: white being a signifier of modern art. Asian 'art', in particular, is often displayed within galleries that have a slight shade – grey, salmon, magnolia or lavender. This contrasts with the atmosphere of the Buddhist temple, which is usually dimly-lit and may be filled with incense smoke. Light is only intended to be admitted 'accidentally' through the doors (Seckel 1989, 6). Darkened colours – red and burgundy in particular – predominate and are often used decoratively on walls, ceilings and columns (Lip 1986, 17, 12).

Furthermore, in the temple, Buddhist statues tend to be placed in particular hierarchical configurations: located on shrines and altars in relation to their position within the pantheon. Buddhist images thus tend to function as part of sets and, as such, are not intended to be perceived individually. Three dimensional statues are also often constructed to be viewed frontally, and from a lower level, the backs of deities usually hidden by partitions in temples. The ability to walk around Buddhist statues, the desire to go up close and examine them as three-dimensional sculpture – as in an art gallery – goes against the visual regimes some of these images were originally created to exist within.

Considering the problems of exhibiting Buddhist images as 'art', the display at the World Museum Liverpool was deliberately predicated upon a very different approach. Rather than focus on formal qualities, it was decided that the objects' religious meanings within the Buddhist system of belief would be the dominant way in which they would be interpreted. As we have seen, the immersive environment of a shrine room has been increasingly apparent in Western museums over the past 10 years, and even for a national 'art' museum, such as the V&A, the religious qualities of objects was a key consideration for the new Buddhism displays which opened in 2015 (Clarke, 2015).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See: Kieschnick 2003, 62; Gombrich 1966, 24; Gell 1998, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, for example, has referred to the plinth as the signifier of art (76). See also Marshall 2015, 460–61, on the museological conventions.

<sup>18</sup> See Clarke 2015 and Durham 2015 for interesting discussions of displays of Buddhist objects at the V&A and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco respectively. Chuang asserts that exhibitions of Buddhist artefacts in

## **The temple in the museum: The Buddhism displays at the World Museum Liverpool**

The Buddhism displays at the World Museum Liverpool were inspired by the museum's important collection of Tibetan artefacts, all associated with Buddhism, many of which were relatively well documented.<sup>19</sup> A substantial display space devoted to this religion was made possible by the large groupings of other Buddhist objects, from Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burma, China, Japan, Korea and Ladakh. Yet it was evident that a themed section on Buddhism challenged the museum's established classificatory system, changing the categorical framework in which the collections had been interpreted. Some of the Buddhist artefacts originally came from the Antiquities department, others were part of Ethnography, where they had been organised according to geographical areas and continents, and interspersed within, for example, the Burmese, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan sections in the stores. A display space devoted to a specific religion was also clearly different from the rest of the World Cultures gallery, which was arranged into continents, and, within that, cultural groupings.<sup>20</sup>

The refurbishment of the museum was made possible by a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant, and the HLF assessors required that the World Cultures gallery should be 'object-focussed', highlighting the quality and diversity of the collections. The overall theme for the World Cultures gallery was of 'contact' and 'encounter' between cultures: there was an extensive China trade collection, as well as artefacts created in Burma for the British, and carvings made in Nigeria which depicted Europeans. Some of the Buddhist objects too spoke physically of their encounters between different worlds – Gandhāran stone sculpture made in North West India and Pakistan in the first century CE, which combined Greek (Hellenic) aesthetics with Buddhist iconography. There was a range of other Buddhist things that had been transformed as a result of the movement of the religion across Asia.

Liverpool Museum was built in 1860 in a neo-classical style characteristic of mid-nineteenth century architecture, approached by an impressive flight of steps, leading to a portico of six Corinthian columns (see fig 1). In May 2005, the building was refurbished as a result of the HLF grant and renamed 'World Museum Liverpool'. The redevelopment project shifted the main entrance away from the imposing neo-classical façade to an adjacent street level doorway. Here visitors initially encountered an impressive six-storey atrium, operating as the orientation area. The World Cultures gallery is arranged in a horseshoe-shaped space on the third floor, representing cultures from Africa, the Americas, Oceania and Asia (<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/wml/visit/floor-plans/world-cultures.aspx>). In the centre of the Asia gallery, the largest single themed area is devoted to Buddhism.<sup>21</sup> While the Buddhism displays are visually distinct from the rest of the World Cultures gallery, they

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museums must emphasise original religious contexts (2000, 116), and Seckel too argued that Buddhist statues in museums must be interpreted and displayed in relation to their once-sacred functions (1989, 5). See also Maunder 2000, 202.

<sup>19</sup> There are around 2,000 items from the Himalayan region: the Tibetan collection, in particular, is considered to be one of the finest and the most comprehensive in the country, its main strength lying in the quality and quantity of religious and ritual artefacts.

<sup>20</sup> See Tythacott 2011 for a more detailed discussion of the formation of the World Cultures gallery.

<sup>21</sup> Approximately 120 square metres.

are nevertheless linked, conceptually, to the overall theme of ‘encounter’, as they chart the spiritual journeys of the religion throughout Asia.



Fig 1. Exterior of World Museum Liverpool. Photograph by the author.

The display area, reminiscent of a Tibetan temple, was deliberately intended to be an ‘immersive and emotionally engaging’ space (Marshall 2015, 459). Enclosed by a large sloping wall, based on Himalayan architectural designs, on the outside is a row of small display cases each of which contains a single Buddhist amulet, or *gau*. The entrance area is flanked by a pair of bronze guardian lions from Tibet – elevated on plinths and placed in glass cases, they are positioned either side as they would originally have been in a Tibetan temple. The backs of the cases in the gallery are painted burgundy and red, and the low lighting is noticeably darker than in the rest of the World Cultures gallery.<sup>22</sup> Dark brown wooden beams run across the top of the space, evoking the architecture of Buddhist temples in Tibet. The environment has a soft, welcoming feel – the floor is carpeted, rather than the laminated wood in the rest of the Asia gallery. All the deity figures are elevated on plinths, and positioned to be viewed frontally, their backs obscured, as they would have been in the temples.<sup>23</sup> The spatial semiotics thus reinforces the devotional context.

Yiao-hwei Chuang suggested that in order to instil respect, Buddhist deity figures in museums must always be positioned ‘on a shrine with flowers, candles, incense, fine cloths and offering bowls, providing a focus for devotional and meditative practice’ (2000, 116). Yet due to the museum’s understandable conservation restrictions, it was not possible to incorporate cut flowers, lit candles or smoking incense in the cases. In their original temples, these deities and their associated artefacts would have been the focus of ceremonies, with the sounding of gongs, bells and an accompaniment of scriptural recitation. In order to evoke the rituals, soft Tibetan chants can be heard upon entering the area. In the centre of the room is space for activities or ceremonies, and seating for those who wish to rest,

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<sup>22</sup> Marshall has commented on this use of darkened, subdued lighting in museum displays to suggest original sacred settings (2015, 461).

<sup>23</sup> Clarke too notes his concern to elevate Buddhist statues on plinths in the Robert H.N. Ho Family Foundation Gallery of Buddhist Sculpture at the V&A in order to ‘honour’ Buddhist beliefs (2015, 72).

contemplate or worship the images.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the area has on occasions been used by Buddhists as a place for meditation.<sup>25</sup> The design, overall, then is intended to be a 'reconstruction of an actual devotional space in a powerfully tangible and embodied sense' and an 'affective' mode of display (Marshall 2015, 473 and 469).

The display explores the origins, movement and transformation of Buddhism across Asia over the past two and a half thousand years. It begins with a set of Tibetan paintings (*thangka*) in a free-standing case opposite the entrance, in the centre of the room, devoted to key moments in the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama. The historical Buddha lived in India, in the fifth century BCE and the *thangkas* depict him at various stages or moments in his life: his 'enlightenment', 'teaching' and '*parinirvāṇa*'.<sup>26</sup> Next is a section on 'The transmission of Buddhism', which documents the movement of the religion via objects – Gandhāran stone sculptures from Pakistan, a portable shrine from Bhutan (see fig 2), and three gilded wooden manuscript covers from Tibet and Bhutan. Banners hang from the ceiling with Mahāyāna, Theravāda and Vajrayāna boldly imprinted on them, in front of the cases devoted to the relevant traditions, providing a sense of orientation.<sup>27</sup> First is a large case for the Mahāyāna containing a set of imposing deity figures from China and Japan, some of which are life-size (see fig 3). The Theravāda case is adjacent, with its smaller marble and alabaster Buddhas and terracotta votive plaques from Burma. This is followed by a series of cases associated with Vajrayāna – an altar; a section on Tibetan Buddhism; one on wrathful deities; a large shrine case; a *gönkhang* or protective chapel, and a section exploring Tibetan Buddhist iconography.

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<sup>24</sup> I originally planned to have cushions in front of the shrine, and paintings hanging down in the gallery to the side of the shrine. The initial idea was to invite Tibetan monks to inaugurate the space by creating a sand mandala, though this was not possible due to a need to reduce costs.

<sup>25</sup> Emma Martin, Head of Ethnology, World Museum Liverpool (personal Interview, 21 August 2007). Indeed, in 2008, Xing Boliu, 7th Grand Master of the Shaolin Monastery in China, fell to his knees in front of a large Chinese statue of Guanyin, and prayed to her for over two hours (Eldon Worrall, Research Associate, World Museum Liverpool. Personal Interview, 12 July 2008).

<sup>26</sup> There are three paintings in this section - one depicting the historical Buddha seated in meditation, with his right hand touching the ground (*bhūmiśparśa mūdra*), which commemorates the night of his enlightenment; another shows the Buddha in the teaching position with his hands making the gesture of turning the 'Wheel of Law' (*dharmacakra mūdra*); the final image, the 'Rebirth diceboard', depicts a popular educational game, similar to Snakes and Ladders, which is laid out with possible opportunities for future rebirths and paths to enlightenment. This broadly relates to the Buddha's '*parinirvāṇa*' or final *nirvāṇa*.

<sup>27</sup> 'Buddhism travels East: Mahāyāna Buddhism; China, Korea and Japan' is written on one. 'Buddhism travels South: Theravāda Buddhism: Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos' on another and 'Buddhism travels North: Vajrayāna Buddhism: Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Mongolia' is on the final one.



Fig. 2 Portable shrine, *Tashi gomang*, Bhutan.  
Accession number 54.85.40. Copyright: National Museums Liverpool.



Fig 3. View of Mahāyāna case, Buddhism displays, World Cultures gallery. Copyright: National Museums Liverpool.

Buddhist practitioners worked closely with curators to develop the key concepts and interpretative texts for the displays. In particular, Zara Fleming, Vice-President of the Tibet Society and Tibetan Relief Fund of the UK, herself a practising Buddhist, was the main consultant, selecting key objects and writing associated labels for the Vajrayāna objects. Other Buddhists and specialists were consulted.<sup>28</sup> In 1997, the museum contacted His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama to inform him of the plans for redisplay. He wrote back in support of the gallery, his words being used at the top of the main text panel, as the key introduction to the displays:

Tibetans would regard most of these artefacts as sacred. The statues and paintings represent aspects of enlightenment. All of them are a source of inspiration. We say that for a Buddhist practitioner the function [of objects] is to support faith, because they encourage the aspiration to acquire the qualities the images represent.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most visually powerful – and largest – cases in the gallery is arranged in a way that resembles a shrine display (see fig 4). This consists of a series of four stepped plinths upon which over sixty objects are placed. They have been positioned here in roughly the configuration they would have been seen in Tibet. Rather than imposing Western museological classifications on to the objects, therefore, the shrine replicates Buddhist systems of spatial organisation. Three *thangka* are hung from the walls at the back.<sup>30</sup> In front of the central *thangka*, and in the centre of the top plinth, sits a cast metal image of the historical Buddha, seated with his right hand in earth touching gesture (*bhūmisparśa mūdra*). Considerably larger than the other deity figures, this image was commissioned for the gallery from a contemporary metalworker in Nepal. As it went through Nepalese customs, however, it was opened and the sacred artefacts in the interior were confiscated. For Annie Hall: ‘The blessings of the statue disappear if the inner contents are removed, so from a traditional point of view the deity has been destroyed’ (2004, 72). Prising open a consecrated figure and taking out these objects, therefore, can be considered as sacrilege. Some Buddhists even compare the opening up of a statue with ‘tearing the guts out of a living thing’ (Reedy 1991, 32). Considering the severity of this action, Zara Fleming arranged for the hollow metal statue to be re-consecrated in a shrine room at the Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London.<sup>31</sup> Once this ceremony was complete, the newly ‘activated’ Buddha was transported to Liverpool and brought into the gallery with its eyes covered, in accordance

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Daniel Quall King. Dr. Dorji, Joint Director of the National Museum of Bhutan advised on the displays. David Weldon, Senior Consultant for Sotheby’s, helped out with the dating of Himalayan deity figures and manuscript covers. William Watson, formerly Curator of the British Museum and Professor of Chinese Art at the University of London, advised on the overall layout and thematic sections for the gallery. I am also grateful to Lynne Heidi Stumpe, former Curator of Oceanic collections at World Museum Liverpool, and a practising Buddhist, who kindly provided advice from both a personal and professional perspective.

<sup>29</sup> In May 2004, His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited Liverpool to accept a Fellowship from John Moores University and gave an address at the Anglican cathedral. Unfortunately, he wasn’t available to visit the Buddhism display and ‘bless’ the space before it opened to the public in 2005.

<sup>30</sup> From left to right there is Nāgeśvarāja (Buddha of the *nāga* realm), Amitābha (Buddha of Infinite Light) and Mañjuśrī (Bodhisattva of Wisdom).

<sup>31</sup> Zara Fleming to Margaret Warhurst, Head of Humanities, World Museum Liverpool (email, 27 August 2003).

with Nepalese tradition. Only after being placed on the shrine was its face unwrapped.<sup>32</sup> As Ivan Gaskell notes, such ‘animated’ objects can ‘function in a more complex manner than might have been the case had they merely been activated by the museum in an aesthetic or art-historical manner’ (2003, 154).<sup>33</sup>



Fig 4. View of the Tibetan shrine case, Buddhism displays, World Cultures gallery. Copyright: National Museums Liverpool.

On either side of this consecrated Buddha sit smaller statues of other Tibetan figures – the *dharmapālas* or protector deities (Vaiśravaṇa, and Palden Lhamo);<sup>34</sup> Vajrapāni; a lama; Green Tārā; Vajradhāra and Vasudhāra. On the plinths below is range of ritual objects – butter lamps, *stūpas*, prayer wheels, cymbals and offering vessels. Two long telescopic trumpets are placed vertically to the far left and right of the case. At the front, on the floor, are two carved and painted folding wooden tables, which a century earlier had performed a similar function in a Tibetan shrine room. On one of these are a ritual bell, tea-bowl, rosary, *vajra* and manuscript; the other with a skull cup and stand, thighbone trumpet, ritual dagger, ritual drum and cymbals placed on top.

Also in the gallery is an intricately carved and painted wooden altar, created by the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama’s chief carpenter in Darjeeling for Charles Bell, a political officer and close friend of the Dalai Lama.<sup>35</sup> This imposing structure is flanked by two temple hangings. In Tibet,

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<sup>32</sup> Emma Martin, Head of Ethnology, World Museum Liverpool to Jamyang Centre (email, 5 and 11 March 2004).

<sup>33</sup> This is with reference to the Buddhist altar at the Newark Museum, which was consecrated by His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in 1990.

<sup>34</sup> Palden Lhamo is the special protector of the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, and of the Gelugpa school; Vaiśravaṇa is the guardian (*lokapāla*) of the north and the god of wealth.

<sup>35</sup> Accession number 50.31.7a&B. Sir Charles Bell was the political representative in northern India in the first decade of the twentieth century. He became a close friend and advisor to the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and in recognition

the altar would have held a deity figure in each of its eight niches. I worked with Zara Fleming in the museum stores to identify appropriate statues to place inside – a combination of peaceful and wrathful deities, selected on the basis of their identity and also according to their size.<sup>36</sup>

To the left hand side of the large shrine case is a reconstruction of a Tibetan *gönkhang*, or protective chapel – an important feature of most Tibetan monasteries.<sup>37</sup> The entrances to a *gönkhang* may have pieces of black felt covering them with white skull designs, or painted wrathful faces. It is necessary to pull back these covers and enter an atmospheric, darkened space, lit by butter lamps flickering below images of wrathful deities. We were concerned here to evoke this sense of indirect visual access to the powerful *gönkhang* imagery. The case was created as a separate small ‘room’, with darkened walls and low lighting, where it is necessary to peer in through one of the windows to see objects in detail.<sup>38</sup>

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of his great service to Tibet was presented with a range of gifts. See Emma Martin, ‘Charles Bell, a collector in Tibet’, Ph.D. dissertation: SOAS, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> The final selected deities were Tārā, Mañjuśrī, Amitāyus, Vajrasattva, Padmapāni-Lokeśvara, and the wrathful deities below, Mahākāla and Yamantaka. The accompanying text panel explains: ‘These are positioned in order to convey the most effective and respectful combination of enlightenment and protection.’

<sup>37</sup> The text panel describes how: ‘It houses the guardian figures – *dharmapalas* – and wrathful personal deities – *yidams* – that are important to the monastery. Together they protect the monastery (*gompa*) from harm, the teachings (*dharma*) from destruction and the monks (*sangha*) from obstacles in their life. When it is painted black it creates an atmosphere of awe and mystery. Demonic figures loom out of the darkness to ward off the forces of evil. Other treasures that protect the monastery are here – drums, ritual instruments, dance masks, bone costumes, weapons and sacred relics. Monks spend several hours a day chanting prayers to the rhythm of a drum beat. The prayers help protect the monastery, the spiritual teacher (*lama*) and the lineage of their religious tradition.’

<sup>38</sup> The gallery on Buddhism in the Museum of the History of Religion in St Petersburg has a film projected across the glass on this case so that viewing is distorted. The text in Liverpool explains: ‘The word *gönkhang* means “the house of Mahakala”. In a monastery, images of Mahakala would take up the sacred space’. A wooden dance mask representing this important protective deity is on display. The reconstruction includes a *thangka* of a *dharmapāla*, a wooden hand drum decorated with skulls, a statue of four-headed deity, Kālacakra, a cup made from a human skull, a carved bone ritual apron, a papier-mâché bull headed dance mask (see fig 5) and a ritual mirror worn by a priest in trance. A dark blue dancer’s apron, with central skull design, is displayed above the outside of the case.



Fig 5. Bull mask from Tibet, exhibited in the *gönkhang*.  
Accession number 54.85.186. Copyright: National Museums Liverpool.

## Conclusion

Removed from their original environments and located in this taxonomic arrangement with other Buddhist things, the Liverpool collections have acquired new meanings which transgress their previous classifications: second century Gandhāran stone statues, fourteenth century Tibetan wooden manuscript covers and nineteenth century Burmese marble Buddhas, after all, were never meant to be appreciated in close proximity – rather like exhibiting images from different Christian traditions in a single gallery. The Buddhist collections, thus, have been reconfigured in particular visual and textual narratives, juxtaposed and mobilised by the museum to illustrate the history and movement of this religion. The objects have been deliberately placed within a display devoted to religion, but this is Buddhism, ‘framed and transformed through Western institutions and Western technology’ (Shelton 2003, 188). Despite the gallery attempting to evoke their original sacred environment, these objects are still enshrined in the sealed glass cases of a museum display.

The World Museum Liverpool rejected the aesthetic approach to interpreting Buddhist material, and strove to create a display that evoked the original environments for these religious objects. The resulting exhibition is strongly staged, prompting visitors to locate themselves, and their beliefs, in relation to the space. However, as Marshall has highlighted, the attempt to position ‘visitors within the heart of the religious experience’ is a challenge for contemporary museums (2015, 462). Despite the obvious difficulties of exhibiting spirituality, it is nevertheless important for museums to engage with the sacred aspects of objects in their collections, especially considering the increasingly powerful role of ‘source

communities' as consultants, curators and visitors in the twenty-first century (Paine 2013). While, clearly, it is not possible for museums to recreate the original contexts for objects (Shelton 2003, 188) – as Marshall notes, 'all that is being experienced within the museum can never be anything other than an artificial approximation of a reality that is long gone' (2015, 470) – these displays at least enable the museum's Buddhist collections to exist in an atmosphere of respect.<sup>39</sup> Gaskell notes how sacred objects may be greatly enriched if a range of people is able to use them for a variety of purposes (2003, 160). The Liverpool displays were intended to be symbolically dense, operating at different levels: Buddhists may use the gallery as a place for meditation, while non-Buddhists can learn about the diverse imagery, complexity and historical depth of this religion. This is a space which deliberately allows for multiple perceptions and beliefs.

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<sup>39</sup> See Paine 2013, 55–62, for an excellent analysis of the concept of 'respect' and its application to museums.

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