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Rituals in Western Museum: Through the Construction of the Tibetan Shrine

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the establishment of Tibetan shrines within Western museums and their function in crafting ritualized encounters for attendees, all the while perpetuating Western stereotypes and Orientalist viewpoints regarding Buddhism. Through the analysis of the aesthetic design, immersive environments, and interactive elements of these shrine displays, the study reveals how museums position Tibetan artifacts to evoke a sense of the sacred, detaching visitors from the secular world. It emphasizes how the museum experience reflects ritual participation, transforming visitors into active participants rather than passive observers. Furthermore, the article evaluates how these carefully crafted experiences sustain a romanticized and superficial perception of Tibetan culture, which is deeply embedded in Western ideals of spirituality and serenity. While these museum shrines may offer visitors an entry into an idealized version of Tibetan Buddhism, they also contribute to a broader narrative of Orientalism that distorts and simplifies the complexities of Tibetan identity and religious practices.

Keywords: Museum, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist art, Religious images.

1. Introduction

In contemporary Western museums, exhibitions have evolved beyond conventional showcases of cultural artifacts, embracing a progressive approach that integrates digital interactivity and immersive spatial designs. This innovative trend seeks to offer visitors a rich, multi-sensory experience. Through diverse curatorial approaches, these museums showcase cultural treasures from around the world. Whether it's the ancient civilizations of Asia, the local cultures of Africa, or the art of indigenous peoples from the Americas, all can find a place in these museums.

The Tibetan Shrine is an important religious and cultural space, typically built by Tibetan Buddhists. In Buddhism, a shrine can be situated in various locations, such as within a temple near a monastery, inside a pagoda or stupa, at home, along a roadside, or in areas of notable natural beauty or historical significance related to the Buddha's life. These shrines may house representations of other Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Thangkas. [1]. The shrine is not only a focal point for offerings but also serves as a meditation space filled with a sacred atmosphere. In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the shrine holds profound religious significance, symbolizing the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha, helping practitioners connect with the Dharma and attain inner peace and enlightenment.

The Tibetan Shrine appears in the Asian culture section of many of today's leading Western museums, such as the National Museum of Asian Art (Washington D.C.) in Figure 1, the

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Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, the Horniman Museum (London), and many others. These museums have created a softly illuminated space adorned with Buddhist artifacts, accompanied by subtle chanting melodies in the background, providing visitors with a distinctive encounter of tranquility.

This article focuses on how Western museums have created a ritualized experience for their visitors through the construction of the Tibetan Shrine, and how such construction actually deepens Western stereotypes and orientalism about Buddhism.



Figure 1: Tibetan Shrine Room in Rubin Art Museum (NYC, USA)

2. Visiting Museums as a Ritual

Much of modern museum design and planning makes the whole act of visiting a museum a ritual itself. With the development of museums, museum exhibits have gradually evolved from the “one-way relationship” of the mid-nineteenth century to the “two-way process” of today. This indicates a transition from a historical context where objects and information were solely disseminated to the audience by institutional authorities, to the contemporary scenario where source communities are formed within museums, enabling diverse viewpoints to contribute to the comprehensive development of exhibitions.[2]. From this modification, James Clifford formulated the notion of the "contact zone," which denotes a "realm where groups that are geographically and historically distinct engage with one another and cultivate sustained interactions."[3]. While the concept was first applied to some indigenous cultural exhibits, it has gradually appeared in a wide range of contexts, with the Tibetan Shrine Room being a very typical example. In contrast to the one-sided exhibition of Buddhist artifacts, the museum allows the audience to interact and link with the exhibits by constructing such a space. IAt the Rubin Art Museum, visitors can engage with various interactive installations, including a designated space for writing messages on sticky notes to be displayed on strings, a sand painting station open for experimentation, and an opportunity to play traditional Tibetan musical instruments. Even if one does not know a lot about Buddhism, visitors can sit on cushions and meditate in the room, where they can experience Buddhism in a more immersive way and may be prompted by the environment to have a special experience of their own.

With such a museum design, visiting the museum itself, whether visitors realize it or not, has become a ritual, because the visitor is already subliminally involved in this exhibition and is no longer an outsider. Catherine Bell, in her work on Ritual Theory and Ritual Practice, posits that ritual behavior should not be viewed as a standalone category; instead, it represents a unique mode of action. The objective is to differentiate these actions from mundane activities by employing particular "ritualization" techniques, which in turn fosters a perception of distinctiveness or sanctity. [4]

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In the article "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship," author Carol Duncan defines the process of visiting a museum as a ritual. Ducan sees a parallel between the process of visiting a museum and participating in a ritual. Visiting a museum can be seen as a special type of behavior. In a space different from everyday environments, visitors enter with a sense of curiosity, respect, or appreciation for art, paying more attention to their senses than in daily life. This series of actions ritualizes the museum experience. In a ceremonial context, individuals might experience a recitation of texts or specific musical compositions, adhere to a designated pathway, or partake in another organized activity that connects to the historical significance or interpretation of the location. [5]. In museums, "art history supersedes traditional history," as visitors navigate a curated pathway shaped by the museum's architecture and the sequence of dining establishments, all directed by the provided guidelines [5]. In the cases that museums include Tibetan art, visitors will first see some artworks in normal display cases, and then come to the Shrine room, where they will be further stimulated by the environment and be completely transported to a sacred, religious experience.

3. Museum as a Sacred Space

When the entire act of visiting the museum is regarded as a ritual, there are not only individual display cases but also many beautifully constructed installations within the museum.

In the display of Tibetan Shrine in Western museums, Tibetan artifacts are “intentionally positioned in the configurations they are thought to have on a traditional Buddhist altar” [6]. By employing aesthetic enhancements, architectural elements, and tailored lighting and acoustics, they strive to replicate or establish a sacred atmosphere. [7].

Religious studies scholar Rudolf Otto introduced the notion of the "Numinous," characterized as a "supremely vital force" that transcends moral and rational considerations. [8]. This is a sense of trembling and sacredness about religion that cannot be told from the outside but can be felt directly from the heart of the individual. Scholar Mircea Eliade subsequently employed his concept to further elaborate in her article, "The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion." She posits that the religious and secular realms represent two contrasting domains; the religious sphere is characterized by order, positivity, and beauty, while the secular realm is marked by suffering, chaos, and disarray[9]. Modern society has lost its sense of the sacred, so people have begun creating sacred spaces in an attempt to recapture the beauty of the divine world. This is why structures like temples and churches have emerged, often with tall spires that reach upward, symbolizing a closer connection to heaven.

What evokes a numinous experience in individuals is its distinctiveness from the mundane aspects of reality, instilling a profound sense of awe and trepidation due to the overwhelming and transcendent nature of the sacred and the mysterious. So humans attempt to establish a connection between the real world and the ideal divine realm, and non-religious people can have their own sacred spaces, places where people can seek refuge or peek into the sacred, such as the little room from your childhood that means a lot to you.

The museum has established a Tibetan Shrine as a hallowed space, incorporating a range of elements that are typically absent from daily existence. This design facilitates a visitor's experience of disconnection from the outside world as soon as they enter the room. The indoor environment lacks artificial lighting, relying solely on flickering candles and dark-hued wall hangings. The outside world is obscured, making the details of the thangka paintings indistinct, with only the golden Buddha illuminated by candlelight. This setting, accompanied by low chanting music, fosters a sense of isolation and mystery, allowing customers to experience a "luminous" feeling and a sacred connection beyond the mundane.

The overall darkness is the source of mysterious feeling, symbolizing the blindness of our world/ourselves. On the contrary, the flickering lights is lively and is reflected on the golden Buddha,

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which reminds us of the Buddha as the enlightened one. In a similar vein, certain museums, including the National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, D.C., feature a virtual representation of the Tibetan shrine room on their official websites. Notably, rather than the phrase "Tibetan Buddhist Shrines," the more prominent term "Sacred Space" along with an "Enter" button positioned below immediately captures attention. Once click the “Enter”, you can see a clear panoramic view of the room, the website automatically plays chanting(Figure 2). On this webpage, viewers can drag the screen to control what you see, just like in the real world where you can control the direction of your gaze. The wide-angle display also simulates the visual effect of the human eye, and a VR option offers viewers an even deeper immersive experience. It can be seen that the museum very clearly presents the space as one that is distinctive and possesses a sense of the sacred. Prior to experiencing the actual environment, the notion of "Sacred Space" is pre-established in the minds of the audience, enhancing their perception of the forthcoming visuals through psychological influence, thereby creating a direct correlation between the two. Regardless of how viewers previously perceived the Tibetan Shrine, it now becomes sacred. No matter how they imagine a Sacred Space, after viewing, the Tibetan Shrine becomes the embodiment of that concept.



Figure 2: Website of Tibetan Shrine Room of National Museum of Asian Art (Washington, D.C, USA)

4. Museum Shrines Help Propagate Orientalism

As outlined in the preceding section, every aspect of the museum has been meticulously curated, encompassing the overall visitor pathway and the design of the Tibetan Shrine room, which has been intentionally crafted with Buddhist artifacts. Each message conveyed to visitors is a reflection of the museum's intended narrative. "Similar to the ceremonial edifices of yore, by achieving its stated objectives as a museum—namely, the preservation and exhibition of art objects—it simultaneously undertakes broader, often less overt political and ideological functions."[5]. Within this, the presentation of Buddhist art in Western museums is also influenced by underlying ideological factors.

Edward Said introduced the concept of "Orientalism" in 1978, and in his interview "Edward Said On Orientalism," he explains that the West has always had a stereotypical and superficial understanding of other places. Through their limited perspective, they create an "ideal other," and based on this, they spread these incomplete images through various media. This leads to other nations being deprived of the chance and the entitlement to authentically showcase their identities to the Western world. [10].

In a 2010 article in The Washington Post, Blake Gopnik argued that creating a sacred space in this way for visitors to experience is essentially promoting a religion. The National Museum of Asian Art even invited monks to bless the exhibition before it opened, and visitors were required to remove their shoes before entering. These actions communicate to the Western audience that Buddhism is accurately depicted in this exhibition. Had the National Gallery incorporated an operational Catholic

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altar, complete with choirboys and chalices, in its present display of sacred Spanish art, there would have been significant outrage. [11]. But most people are not offended when museums present Buddhism in such a straightforward manner, because Buddhism for the West is full of “oriental mysticism” accompanied by “exotic”, ” happy” and “peaceful” stereotypes.

Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have long been objects of Western fantasy. In contrast to the majority of Buddhist communities across Asia, Tibet did not fall under direct European colonial domination nor did it engage in any significant efforts to "modernize."[12]. As a result, the West knew less about Tibet compared to other regions, which only made it appear more mysterious and remote. Before the takeover by the Chinese Communist Party, Tibet was regarded by the West as having the “purest and most original Buddhism”. Tibet is “isolated”, Tibetans are “content” and monks are “spiritual” [13]. Within the self-centered lifestyle of the West, Tibet was viewed as a remedy for the declining Western civilization serves as a remedy for the progressively hollow and ultimately unsatisfying quest for material gratification, acting as a revitalizing agent to rejuvenate its essence. [13]. Now, Western museums tell people that ones don't need to travel to the distant East to seek this spiritual solace; an immersive spiritual experience can be obtained in the museum, feeling the mystery, purity, and peace of Tibet. This singular portrayal and description of Tibet overlook the complex social environment of the region. The renowned Tibetan artist and director, Pema Tseden, illustrates the conflicts arising between faith and real-life issues within this ideological context in his films, which are set against the backdrop of Tibetan beliefs and culture. In the case of Snow Leopard, a conflict emerges when a snow leopard preys on a flock of sheep: should it be liberated in alignment with Buddhist principles, or should the herder pursue restitution?[14] This issue reveals the multiple tensions between the Tibetan region and the Chinese government, as well as between religious and secular life. These deeper aspects are often neglected or obscured by museum presentations. And the lsting impression left for Westerners who are unfamiliar with Tibet still centers around stereotypes of Tibet and Buddhism.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of Tibetan Shrines housed in Western museums uncovers a multifaceted relationship among cultural representation, ritual practices, and the reinforcement of stereotypes.

Through meticulously designed environments, these museums aim to create an immersive experience that transcends the ordinary, providing visitors with a simulated sacred space that evokes the essence of Tibetan Buddhism. However, this endeavor is not without its implications. The development of these environments may improve the experience for visitors; however, it concurrently solidifies Western views of Tibet as an enchanting and mysterious region, thus perpetuating a variant of Orientalism.

As seen in the design and curation of the Tibetan Shrine, museums simplify its representation into an idealized version that fits neatly into Western fantasies, further entrenching stereotypes that view Tibetans as passive recipients of spirituality rather than active agents in their own cultural narrative. Additionally, by creating a ritualized visiting experience, museums position themselves as mediators of knowledge and cultural understanding, yet this role becomes complicated by the underlying power dynamics at play.

The idealization of Tibet fundamentally undermines its historical context and marginalizes it from the tangible world, consequently disempowering Tibetans in their ability to shape a nuanced and contentious daily existence [12]. As one of the most important mediums for disseminating culture and history, museums bear a greater social responsibility, de-orientalize and decolonize, considering how to assign equal value and significance to every story along the historical continuum, as well as how to convey narratives without under structural violence to the audience. This is a continuous challenge that modern museums need to address.

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