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Re-Imagining Tibetan Buddhist Mandalas: THE PRACTICAL INCORPORATION OF CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS WITH TRADITIONAL VAJRAYANA SYMBOLISM

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Research performed under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Barry

An Examination Into the History & World of Tantric Buddhism

Tantric Buddhism, also known as Vajrayana Buddhism, is a rich and secretive religious tradition with practices, beliefs, and artwork stemming back to its initial development in the 3rd century.

The native Tibetan tradition has origins in age-old Indian philosophical beliefs and practices from which the full-fledged religion of today developed out of. While the religion has been generally marked by its hidden and secretive nature, the world of Tibetan Buddhism has both forcibly and naturally expanded outside the nation of Tibet. Years of both friendship and conflict with other nations rattled the small state into modernization, globalization, and steadfast connections with Tibetan roots and culture.

Today, Tibet, its people, and its religion generally remain under watchful supervision of the Chinese government; though, Tibetan culture continues to flourish, along with its religious and social traditions.

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Central to Vajrayana Buddhism is the belief in a "void essence" or nature. All beings and things within the universe possess such a nature, as the idea of emptiness removes spiritual and physical boundaries between all that lies in existence. This idea encourages religious practice for the benefit of all beings through attaining enlightenment.

The teachings of Tantric Buddhism are known to be quite secretive, being passed strictly from teacher to student. This secretive nature also speaks to the power of tantric practice, which comes in many forms, including meditation, yoga, tantric sexual-yogic practices, and the creation and meditation upon mandalas.

Although it may be clear, practice is central to Tibetan Buddhism, as the tradition places emphasis on the way beings move and act within the world.



A working definition of

aestheticism:

An ongoing and developmental establishment of what may be viewed or understood as fitting within the current confines of beauty or attractiveness. The criteria for such objects or concepts is typically developed through cultural, social, religious, economic, and, most dominantly, personal preference and is hardly limited to a singular and general understanding.

Where East & West Meet:

Western Aesthetic Ideas in Conjunction with Traditional Vajrayana Artwork

The study and concept of aesthetics, while it has not always had a formal title, has been in the works for centuries. A form of pseudo-aestheticism has always somewhat existed, as humans have always naturally possessed a preference for the beautiful and attractive, whatever form it may take.

Formally, the term *aesthetic* was first used in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in the 18th century; however, centuries prior, philosophers like Plato and Aristotle began the scholarly history of aesthetics. This historical development would begin with aesthetic judgements and studies on poetry and literature, and would then eventually extend to visual art in subsequent years. Through the middle ages and Renaissance, the academic field of aesthetics would continue to grow and establish itself, with the result being the field and studies we know today.

Aesthetics, while they may be identified, described, and defined, can hardly be generalized and are always under the influence of social, cultural, religious, economic, and, most of all, personal preference. And, in today's world, we find ourselves saturated by a number of different ideas relating to beauty and attractiveness--a number of different *aesthetics*.

Buddhism & Me:

A Practical Application of Contemporary Aesthetics

In researching both Vajrayana Buddhism and aesthetics, my goals and hopes for this project were to eventually establish a practical combination of the two fields. As an undergraduate, I pursued two degrees in religious studies and studio art, and I decided to undertake this particular area of research as a combination and culmination of my own interests. As I also hope to eventually create and own my own business, this project was furthermore an exploration into the practical side of these ideas as well.

By combining aspects of contemporary aesthetics with symbolism taken from traditional Vajrayana mandalas, this bridging connection has the potential for religious and non-religious benefit. The re-imagining of traditional symbolism into the form of contemporary ideas of attractiveness and beauty has the potential to generate religious appreciation and curiosity, with the possibility of prompting viewers to explore the world of Tibetan Buddhism. Additionally, such re-imagined work has the ability to renew religious zeal, awe, and inspiration, once more bringing life and energy to long-time and new practitioners. And, overall, such practicality provides astounding potential for display, practice, and appreciation anywhere, whether it be in the home or in a religious space, by religious practitioners or art-lovers alike!



Thousand-Armed Chenresi
Distemper & gold on cloth
14th century

Tan · tric

to weave; to

compose;

a powerful instrument

for expansion

Vajra · yana

the diamond vehicle;

void; emptiness;

vehicle



Mandala of Jnanadakini
Distemper on cloth
Late 14th century



**Four Mandalas of the
Guhyasamaja Cycle**
Distemper & ink on cloth
16th century