Tibet

Martin Brauen
Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism
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This beautifully illustrated volume was published in conjunction with the exhibition "Mandala: The Perfect Circle" presented by the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City (2009–2010). It updates the author's iconic *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (1997), which was the English translation of his original German work published in 1992. This reprint of the 2009 updated version contains forty-seven new color plates analyzed by eight wonderful scholars of Tibetan art and culture. Brauen's earlier edition had appeared toward the end of what might justly be called "America's decade of the mandala," engendered in the fall of 1991 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama conferred the Kālacakra Tantra initiation at Madison Square Garden's Paramount Theater. Its thousands of participants were transfixed by the nine-foot multicolored particle *maṇḍala* (*dkyil-'khor*) comprising the majestic palace of the Kālacakra deity; it was, said one journalist, "a revelation." Subsequently, the *kālacakra* ("wheel of time") *maṇḍala* was created in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the IBM Gallery in New York, and the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Mandala exhibits were not limited to the *kālacakra maṇḍala*. At scores of small-scale university events, throngs of silent spectators held their breath as monk-artisans channeled sand through copper funnels (*chak-pur*) to create impossibly detailed deities dancing at the center of jewel-bedecked palaces. At Cornell University, new computer graphic technology enabled the Vajrabhairava *maṇḍala* to rise from its two-dimensional picture plane and take shape in its spinning, three-dimensional visualized form. Amidst the accompanying surge of *maṇḍala*-related publications, Brauen's erudite yet lucid work emerged as the *locus classicus* for clarifying and celebrating these remarkable works.

This spring, when I was gifted the updated 2009 version, I jumped at the chance to write a review. Since Brauen's first edition, the academic landscape has been transformed by the material turn's attention to the reciprocity between humans, objects, and the built environment. What had once been an intellectual experiment conducted by a handful of art historians is now a fixture in sociology, religion, history, and literary studies. Would the new *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* reflect and support this kind of work?

The answer is a qualified yes. The book has six chapters, at the center of which are forty-seven deeply saturated color plates accompanied by descriptions by eight leading scholars of Tibetan art and culture. It is these images, paired with expert visual analysis and rich historical contextualization, that will mesmerize material scholars. At the center of an eighth-century painted "Five-Deity Mandala of Amoghapāśa," collected by French

explorer Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) in his 1906 mission to Dunhuang, a seated, four-armed deity gracefully extends an arched foot. His tight leggings and jewelry, explains Karl Debreczeny (Rubin Museum of Art), speak to the new Indian models entering Central Asia in the eighth century. A closed gilt copper lotus ("Cakrasaṃvara Lotus Mandala," 126–27) miraculously opens to reveal a *saṃvara* ("stoppage") deity embracing his consort on a lotus platform, surrounded by an adoring celestial entourage standing on eight tiny petal thrones. The ring of symbols at the base, "[a]s in the gesture of offering," is the mechanism by which the lotus is opened. Amy Heller (University of Bern) highlights the aesthetic and political resonances of "Four Mandalas of the Vajrāvalī" spread over four plates (99–105), tracing their creation in 1375 to a ceremony honoring the abbot of the Sakya and de facto ruler of Tibet. A densely populated *thang-ka* ("something rolled up") featuring a deep-green Buddha Amogasiddhi in a sea of red (90–91) is shown by Christian Luczantis (School of Oriental and African Studies) to have "puzzling" stylistic elements; perhaps we should rethink the established date of composition? From Jeff Watt (Himalayan Art Resources) we learn that a tiny orange *mañjuśri dharmadhātu vāgīśvara* is nothing less than "a coded visualization that contains all essential Buddhist teachings from Pali and Sanskrit sutras" (112–13). I have already made several of these eloquent picture essays into class handouts.

From a "material turn perspective," the original six chapters are informative yet feel less current. The text is largely identical to the earlier edition, although the first chapter on "Approaching the Mandala" offers a new taxonomy of *maṇḍala*s into "one of four main categories on the basis of its center," which is better suited to nonspecialists. Chapter 2, "Center of the Buddhist Wheel of the Teaching," combines routine summaries of Mahāyāna Buddhist basics with more turgid expositions of *anuttarayoga* tantric teachings. While scholars of the "lived object" will appreciate the images of woodblock *yantra*s, paper amulets with strings and thread-cross palaces, they might wish for a fuller discussion of their affective capacities and agency—their status as what political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) calls "vibrant matter." "Outer Mandala: The Person" explores different models of the Buddhist cosmos with the help of computer-generated diagrams that visually translate two-dimensional images into three dimensions. Yet its subsequent treatment of the *stūpa*—burial sites for the ashes of the Buddha that develop into centers of worship and pilgrimage—feels oddly lacking. Here, I thought, is a moment to apply Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and frame the *stūpa* as a node in a vast network of interconnected actors, whereby every pilgrim, stone, artisan, prayer flag, and carving is a participant in the *stūpa*'s story, including the Buddha himself.

Chapter Four, "Inner Mandala: The Person" shines in its treatment of the correlations and parallels between cosmos and the human, especially in the *kālacakra* tradition, yet "material turn" scholars might welcome a deeper discussion of the ontological status and shared agency of that person-cosmos relationship. When the deities of the *kālacakra* were ritually invited to reside in the *maṇḍala* at Madison Square Garden, they were present in ways that transcended "the Platonic habits in which we imagine the material world as a mere projection of something more meaningful beyond it" (Roberts 2017, 65). When the initiates marched past that nine-foot masterpiece, they were not mere spectators viewing an inert object; they were, in the thinking of art historian Michael Yonan, getting "out of the cave" (Yonan 2011, 245). Brauen's concluding chapter, "The Mandala and the West," surveys the way that the *maṇḍala* has been (mis)understood by Western analysts, especially Carl Jung. *Maṇḍala* meditation is perhaps most valuable as

an antidote to the "numerous rites of violation" of our human-centered, technologically oriented, and consumerist world. Two decades later and 0.36 degrees warmer since his first edition, it is hard to disagree.

Brauen's new *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* is a substantive update to his iconic 1997 edition. Its lucid text and new color plates, complemented by the erudition of eight leading scholars of Tibet, make this an invaluable addition to any public or university library.

References

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