

The Boston Globe

What Tibetan deities can teach us about adapting to a new world

By Peabody Essex Museum, February 17, 2023.



Tsherin Sherpa, *3 Wise Men*, 2019. Gold leaf, acrylic, and ink on canvas.
Collection of Seema Paul, California.

Anyone who leaves their home must decide what to take with them: clothing for a new climate, seeds for new soil, or tools for a new way of living. There are also the intangible aspects of culture, such as religion or oral tradition, that may or may not make it on the journey.

This idea is a focal point of “Spirits: Tsherin Sherpa with Robert Beer”, a new exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) that considers how “the experience of immigration and migration can transform how we view our cultures, our identities and spiritual connection,” according to the curators. The exhibition is the first centered around Himalayan art at PEM in nearly 30 years and represents an important showcase of “an often-overlooked genre of contemporary South Asian art.”

Artist Tsherin Sherpa was born in Nepal and spent years training in Tibetan Buddhist thangka painting with his father, Urgen Dorje, before immigrating to California in 1998. When he was growing up, Sherpa remembers his grandmother telling stories of the spirits that dwelled in the mountains and water, and protected those who lived there. These stories inspired his 2009 painting *Spirit*, a meticulously rendered “part-human, part-deity” who wears the face of the protector Mahakala and a human body covered in tiny photographs of Tibetan immigrants.

“I was living away from Nepal, where I was born, trying to readjust myself in a different environment,” Sherpa reflects. “I wanted to tell a story from [the present] and also drew inspiration from those stories.” What if, he wondered, the guardian deities of his homeland had migrated along with his family and the thousands of others who left the region? That idea generated a series of paintings and sculptures that examines the collisions between spirituality, tradition, pop culture, growth, and identity.

The other artist featured in PEM’s exhibition also discovered his art practice through leaving his homeland. Robert Beer hitchhiked from his native Wales to India in 1970 as a young adult and spent the next six years traveling across India and Nepal, learning from artists including the Tibetan painter Lhasa Jampa. Over the next several decades, he would produce thousands of detailed line drawings, culminating in the world-renowned book “The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs”.

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Despite his lifelong dedication to its art forms, Beer came into Buddhist painting from a technical rather than a spiritual angle. “I was more fascinated in the process of thangka painting, painting the deities, and learning through that rather than studying the teachings... It was more to understand the iconography and how these figures were represented,” he says.

Thangka painting is a devotional art of complex compositions and precise shape and color symbolism. Often painted on silk or canvas, but sometimes embroidered, these paintings are created for instruction, display or private meditation. They depict different forms of the Buddha, bodhisattvas (venerated spiritual figures), protective spirits and wrathful deities.



LEFT: Robert Beer, *Grid drawing of Thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara*, c. 1980. Pen and ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist. RIGHT: Tsherin Sherpa, *Staying Alive (Too Sexy to Die)*, 2011. Acrylic and silver leaf on wood. Elaine W. Ng and Fabio Rossi Collection.

In traditional thangka painting, sacred figures are drawn with precision. “Tibetan art follows a system of strict gridlines for determining proportions of deities based on measurements of finger widths, or sor,” explains Beer. Buddhas are the tallest, followed by bodhisattvas, humans, and other figures. Each chakra, the body centers spaced from the feet to the crown of the head, is divided by a measurement of one palm, 12.5 sor.

The grids that guide these measurements are visible in several of Beer’s works, such as *Grid Drawing of Thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara*, where a depiction of the Buddha stretches out hundreds of limbs in precise angles. In some of Sherpa’s works, his figures explode out of these grid lines, or crouch cheekily in front of them. Sherpa and Beer also both depict mudras, or ritual hand gestures and poses.

“My work is very precise, iconographically correct. Measurements are correct,” says Beer. “Finger widths are correct. Everything is as it should be. Everything is as it should be in Tsherin’s work, but it’s also everything as it could be... It’s echoing on another resonance... Almost like you have to pay homage to the whole tradition.... It’s a process of self-identification.”

Sherpa is likewise “a huge admirer of Robert Beer’s work” after seeing his fellow artist’s books and works in Buddhist centers around the world. “Someone from the West, someone from England, who’s taking this tradition forward — it’s fantastic,” he says. “It shows it’s a two-way street.”

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Installing *the Wish-Fulfilling Tree*, 2016. Copper repoussé mandala, found objects, and rubble. A collaboration with Rajen Shah and team, Kathmandu, Nepal. Courtesy of The Rubin Museum of Art, New York. In *Spirits: Tsherin Sherpa with Robert Beer*, exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum. Photo by Kathy Tarantola. © 2023 Peabody Essex Museum. Photo by Kathy Tarantola/PEM.

He compares traditional representations such as Beer's work to the root of an artistic tree. South Asian contemporary works like his own form the branches, "[stemming] out of these practices, these skills, these techniques... the tradition," he says.

One work in the exhibition brings those branches to life. *Wish-Fulfilling Tree* is shaped like a traditional offering mandala, with a rising tower of concentric rings.

Sherpa first created the work after seeing the chaos left behind by the devastating earthquake that hit Nepal in 2015, incorporating debris from destroyed homes and buildings as well as wishes written by survivors on 500-rupee notes. Besides adding new wishes from museum visitors, every new showing of the tree changes the rubble at its base to include locally relevant debris and found objects. For its exhibition in Salem, Sherpa's tree is surrounded by historic artifacts from the Great Fire of 1914, mementos from the Salem Witch Trials memorial and sand and brick representing the Massachusetts coastline being eaten away by the rising waters of climate change.

"The idea is with this kind of experience, this kind of destruction, this kind of sadness, there's also something beautiful that comes out of it," Sherpa says.