

Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

Since time immemorial, the Himalayas have attracted writers, painters, climbers, seekers and all kinds of mystics. Not surprising then, that right in the heart of Chelsea, one of New York City's main art hubs, sits an entire museum dedicated to preserving and promoting the artistic traditions of the Himalayan region. The Rubin Museum of Art has a permanent collection of over 2,500 paintings, sculptures and textiles from the Tibetan plateau as well as neighboring areas in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia and China. While the private Himalayan art collection of Donald and Shelly Rubin forms the core of the permanent collection, the museum is now a non-profit, public museum. The permanent collection is displayed in two of the six gallery floors of the museum.

Donald and Shelly Rubin purchased their first art piece in the mid-1970s. Walking along Madison Avenue, they were smitten by an 18th century Tibetan painting of White Tara (referred to as the mother of all Buddhas), displayed in an art dealer's window. \$1,500/- later, not only were they the owners of this magnificent Buddhist painting, but it also led to the start of one of the largest private collections of Himalayan art in the world today. In 1998, the Rubins purchased a building housing a section of the luxury department store, Barneys New York, and repurposed it as a museum. The original, six-storey spiral staircase forms the centre of the building around which the galleries are ranged. Inaugurated in October 2004, the Rubin Museum is today the only museum in the United States that is focused on the Himalayan region.



The original, six-storey spiral staircase of the Rubin Museum. Photo by Peter Aaron Esto, courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Art

With a sanctuary-like ambience, the Rubin Museum transports visitors to a realm very different from that of the busy city outside. 'The Gateway to Himalayan Art' is one of its two permanent exhibitions. It focusses on the foundational concepts used in Buddhist and Hindu Himalayan art such as gaining merit or ritual practices, and details the steps involved in the making of artistic traditions such as the



A recreation of the Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room at the Rubin Museum. Photo by David de Armas, courtesy of the Rubin Museum of Art

thangka (Tibetan scroll painting) or a *mandala* (a geometric representation of the universe), among others.

The other exhibition derived from the permanent collection is 'Masterworks of Himalayan Art'. The theme of this exhibition changes each year and a complementary set of objects are displayed in each iteration. The objects in this exhibition highlight the distinguishing features seen in the regional artistic traditions of the various Himalayan geographies, over a period of one millennium (8th - 20th century).

One of the highlights of the museum is the recreation of a Tibetan Buddhist Shrine Room. This oasis of serenity offers the visitor a space for contemplation and meditation, in the midst of a typical New York day.

Usually, the museum also has 3-4 temporary exhibitions that are in sync with the museum's overarching theme. Guided tours of 45-minute duration are conducted at 1:00 pm and 3:00 pm every day. The tours are free with admission.

The immersive experience at the Rubin Museum is incomplete without a visit to the museum's café. Listed as one of the seven best museum restaurants in New York City, Café Serai's menu is inspired by the cuisines of the Himalayan kingdoms. From *momos* (dumplings) to *frankies* (Indian wraps) to custom tea blends, Café Serai celebrates the flavours of the East. A visit to the Rubin Museum is a treat for both the soul and the palate.



The exterior of the Rubin Museum of Art. Photo by the author