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into the MYSTIC

Iwona Tenzing is one of the world's leading Himalayan art dealers. Her gallery, Tenzing Asian Art, services collectors and clients from San Francisco to Hong Kong to Zurich. We catch up with the gallery owner to learn more about her affinity for her work on the brink of her latest exhibition on rare art from the 10th to 13th centuries hitting Hong Kong September 29 through October 2.

The world of Himalayan art is a relatively small one. With just a handful of significant dealers in the world and the fact that a formidable percentage of known Himalayan art is either in museums or private collections, the rarity of this precious art is substantial. So is the rarity of those who curate and deal it. Iwona Tenzing is at the top of the game.

Iwona launched Tenzing Asian Art in 2006, specializing in rare Himalayan art objects of the early Kashmiri Buddhist period, Pala India and Licchavi era that survived in Tibet. Having begun her curatorial career nearly 30 years ago at Xanadu Gallery in San Francisco, where she helped secure the gallery's renown as a prestigious dealer in traditional Himalayan, Chinese and tribal art, today Iwona assists private individuals and museums around the world to build collections of exquisite and significant Himalayan art. Keenly aware of the laws governing the trade, Iwona is quick to point out that the presence of these beautiful pieces in museums and private collections is not accidental, but traceable to the political upheaval of the 1950s in Tibet. This history lends a

profound layer of significance to available existing pieces.

Iwona's extensive ties to and deep understanding of the people and culture of the Himalayas is built on decades of travel and research in the region. Originally from Poland, Iwona came to America at a young age, going on to study Mesopotamian art before being introduced to Himalayan Art by Raymond Handley, owner of Xanadu Gallery—a pivotal moment in her life and career.

"I remember my mentor told me, 'once you open the door to Himalayan art, you'll never turn back,'" says Tenzing.

This was truly the case for Iwona, who continued on to work for a series of private collectors specializing in quality antiquities from Asia and the Himalayas here in the San Francisco Bay Area. The most prominent of which, Xanadu Gallery, she directed.

Her first journey to Tibet in 2000, was also life changing.

"At first glance, the landscape of the Tibetan plateau is breathtaking and wondrous," Tenzing recalls. "It is as though the horizon extends towards an unreachable distance and time.



Iwona Tenzing in her SoMa gallery space.



Illuminated Manuscript Page (detail), West Tibet, 11-12th Century, distemper and gold on paper
Left: Yakshi (Celestial Nymph/Devi), Nepal, 10-11th Century, wood

I saw mural paintings from the 14th Century and statues dating from the 8th to 18th centuries of unprecedented sophistication and in such abundance that it forever altered my perspective of ancient Tibetan civilization. I have never turned back since that visit."

Iwona's relationship with Norbu Tenzing, her husband of 17 years, brings her even closer to the legacy of the Himalayas. Norbu's father was Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, one of the first two individuals known to reach the summit of Mount Everest, which he accomplished with Edmund Hillary in 1953.

Today, Iwona's work has her traveling across the US and the globe, with exhibitions and clients in Hong Kong, Switzerland, France, New York and San Francisco, where she resides. We catch up with Iwona for a closer look at some of the precious pieces in her extensive collection and to learn more about her upcoming Hong Kong

exhibition of 10th to 13th Century art: "THE INCOMPARABLE SUTRAS FROM PALA ART AND KASHMIR: Featuring Illuminated Sutras from the Second Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet."

You seem almost mystified by the art you collect and what you do. Tell us about that feeling and connection to your work.

"I work with devotional art and you sense a numinous quality immediately when you look at the statue or painting. Following the ancient Indian model of representation, the deities are depicted in their ideal form with spectacular fluidity between human and other living forms. For example, the arms of a deity conjure the appearance of elephant trunks and the torso, with accentuated wide shoulders and a narrow waist, resembles the face of a cow viewed head-on.

“Once you open the door to Himalayan art, you'll never turn back.”

Additionally, the form of the Buddha is free of muscles or bone, in sharp contrast to the realism of Greek and Roman sculpture or to Christian art in the West. Instead, the Buddha's form is held in a smooth linearity, his face wears a serene expression, and his eyes appear to look at the beholder, but also beyond, into the distance. The hand gestures outwards to convey his teachings.

In the Yongle statue (to the right) the Buddha's right hand is raised in a gesture to indicate "no fear" in order to teach us about the impermanence of all things. In a Nepali masterpiece, the Buddha's hand extends towards the earth, to symbolize the moment in his life when demons attempted to distract him from his goal of obtaining enlightenment."

What is one misconception or unknown of Himalayan art you'd like to clarify or share?

"In my experience viewers are perplexed and unprepared for the existence of wrathful deities. In Tantric Buddhism there are fierce forms of the Buddhas, and these images can raise complicated emotions and responses from viewers. Enlightened beings may take wrathful forms in order to protect and aid confused sentient beings. They also represent the energy and power that is required to transform negative mental factors into attributes such as wisdom and compassion."

Are the changing dynamics in the global art world affecting your strategy, and if so, how are you adapting or shifting your focus?

"Since the trips made by Italian Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci to Tibet in the 1940s and following the political turmoil of the 1950s, significant collections



Buddha Amoghasiddhi (detail), China, Yongle Mark and Period, 1402-1424, gilt copper alloy with pigment



Five Buddha Illuminations (detail), on Black Manuscript Pages, Tibet, 12-13th Century, pigments on paper, silk cover

have been mainly built in Europe and in the USA. However, in the last 10-12 years, China has emerged as the most promising site for collectors of Himalayan art. Buyers from China have dominated at art auctions and private shows.

The specialized feature of my work makes a retail gallery inessential. The art objects I handle are singular and exceptional, and the minute I acquire an item, I already have a client or collection in mind. In addition to building a presence in the art market, I participate in the Fine Art Asia Fair in Hong Kong every Fall and in the Asia Week in New York every March."

Tell us about your upcoming exhibition in Hong Kong.

"In addition to a selection of sculpture and paintings, I will be presenting illuminated manuscript pages of Pala and Kashmir art dating from the 10th to 13th centuries. Making a donation of such manuscripts was believed to produce

merit for the donor in this lifetime and in the coming lifetimes. The production and dissemination of Buddhist manuscripts, particularly illuminated manuscripts, came at the very crux of the period of propagation and implementation of Buddhism in the Kingdom of Kashmir (between the 9th and 12th centuries); however, very few examples survive today. The same goes for the paintings: I know of only ten surviving Kashmiri paintings and one Pala painting in the world.

Furthermore, illuminated manuscript pages give us insight into the artistic styles of those regions."

"THE INCOMPARABLE SUTRAS FROM PALA ART AND KASHMIR: Featuring Illuminated Sutras from the Second Diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (10th to 13th Centuries)." Will be on display at Fine Art Asia 2018 in the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, September 29 through October 2, 2018 [G](#)

To learn more about Tenzing Asian Art, visit TenzingAsianArt.com iwona@tenzingasianart.com



Seated Four-Arm Mahakala (detail), West Tibet, 14-15th Century, distemper on cloth