

Media release | Zurich, November 2018

## **Next Stop Nirvana – Approaches to Buddhism**

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13 December 2018 – 31 March 2019

**What you have always wanted to know about Buddhism: Who was the Buddha? What did he teach? What are the hallmarks of Buddhism? How did Buddhism spread across the world? What kind of rituals do Buddhists perform in everyday life? These are just some of the questions the major exhibition Next Stop Nirvana – Approaches to Buddhism at the Museum Rietberg seeks to answer. It showcases 2,500 years of Buddhist art and culture.**

Around a hundred remarkable sculptures, paintings, written works, and objects from numerous Asian countries and regions (China, Himalayas, India, Japan, Myanmar, among others) tell of the beginnings of Buddhism in India and its subsequent spread, first across Asia, then to the Western world. The rich testimonies are supplemented by assorted documents and photographs. A collection of gemstones, still venerated by millions of people today together with the sacred remains of the Buddha, is being shown for the first time in Switzerland and certainly marks one of the exhibition's highlights.

Art enjoyment is complemented by the voices of scholarly experts and practising Buddhists who introduce visitors to some of the main concepts of Buddhism, explain key terms such as nirvana or karma, and speak about their own experiences.

The exhibition is for people of all ages: adults, children, as well as adolescents. It acknowledges diversity and gives space to personal experience as well as critical debate. Along with works from the renowned collection of the Museum Rietberg and precious loans, discovery tours for all age groups, a "ABC of Buddhism" manual, and playful interventions allow visitors to become immersed in the fascinating and multi-layered world of Buddhism in all its diversity.

**With support of the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation and Engagement Migros.**

Reviewing 2,500 years of art and cultural history, the exhibition *Next Stop Nirvana – Approaches to Buddhism* sheds light on the rituals, teachings, values, narratives, and legends of Buddhism, as well as its dissemination across Asia and the world. The show covers eight thematic fields, including the life of the Buddha, his teachings and their impartation, Buddhist lay and monastic communities, the spread of Buddhism, and, last but not least, its presence in Switzerland today. There are no definite figures about the number of Buddhists in the world today, but estimates range from between 250 and 500 million. In this context, one should not forget that Buddhism is not organized along the lines of church-like structures.

On display are around a hundred sculptures, paintings, and written works from all countries in Asia. The majority come from the renowned collection of the Museum Rietberg and from private collections. Highlights from the Rietberg Museum are presented anew while works that have never been shown before wait to be discovered, among them legendary Greek-looking figures from Gandhara, richly adorned bodhisattva statues from China, Burmese bronzes, representations from Japan, Tibetan thangkhas, along with an intriguing range of ritual objects.

In the context of the exhibition, significant pieces from the Rietberg's Chinese, Japanese, and Indian collections as well as a selection of bronzes from Berti Aschmann's Himalayan collection have captivating stories of their own to tell. A number of objects from the collection of the legendary

Bernese gallerist Toni Gerber, acquired by the museum in 2008, as well as pieces from the Coninx Collection, lent to the Museum Rietberg on a permanent loan basis in early 2018, are being presented to the public for the first time. In addition, richly detailed Tibetan paintings from the Museum der Kulturen Basel and the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zurich invite viewers to immerse themselves in the pictorial world of Buddhism, while a Japanese scroll measuring fourteen metres in length takes visitors through the life of the Buddha like in a comic strip.

Probably the most remarkable loan in the exhibition refers to a collection of gemstones, which the British landowner and hobby archaeologist William Claxton Peppé (1852 – 1936) unearthed on his estate in northern India in 1898. They were lying encased in boxes, deep down in a so-called stupa, that is, a brick-lined burial mound. Moreover, clues indicated that the stupa also contained the bodily remains of the Buddha. The find was a sensation. It seemed that, for the first time, evidence of the Buddha's real existence had been discovered. The actual relics were distributed in a grand ceremony in Thailand in 1900 among major Buddhist temples and monasteries in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, and have since then been the object of veneration for millions of people. The gemstones are being displayed for the first time in Switzerland.

The so-called "historical" Buddha is regarded as the founder of Buddhism. Buddhist believers as well as scholars assume that the Buddha traces back to an actual historical person, namely to Prince Siddhartha Gautama who is said to have lived in northern India between the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. We have no hard evidence of the Buddha's real-life existence. However, what we do know is the way people throughout the ages and in different countries painted a picture of the Buddha's life. The exhibition sheds light on these varied interpretations from a neutral perspective by introducing the audience to the stories and legends that surround the figure of the Buddha.

Besides enjoying the works of art, you can listen to the voices of people directly involved: in the section on Buddhist teaching they tell of their personal experiences and share their views on Buddhism with you. In the "video stories" twelve men and women with different backgrounds – practising Buddhists along with scientists and religious scholars – talk about their understanding of Buddhist notions and concepts. Among them are a lecturer in physics, a housewife, a monk, a meditation teacher, and an apprentice.

Buddhist art is one of the main focuses in the Museum Rietberg's collection and educational programme. *Next Stop Nirvana – Approaches to Buddhism* was designed by a joint team of curators (China/Himalayas, India/Southeast Asia, and Japan) and members of the museum's Art Education Programme. The exhibition is part of the long-term educational project "Seeing Art – Understanding Religion". Accordingly, the exhibition also addresses younger audiences, specifically pupils and students from the Canton of Zurich, and relies on a participatory approach. In the context of the project, students from four school classes went in search of traces of Buddhism in Zurich over a period of a whole school year. Their findings are presented in the exhibition, signalling a new way of direct participation.

Ever since the introduction of "Religion and Culture" as a school subject in the Canton of Zurich in 2006, and in cooperation with the cantonal and city's educational institutions, the Museum Rietberg has set itself the task of developing an innovative cultural programme to complement normal lessons in class. After three years of benefitting from the support of Engagement MIGROS, making it possible to procure the necessary teaching materials as well as offer workshops and regular guided tours for schools on the subject of Hinduism, the project now also enjoys the support of the Hong Kong-based Robert H. M. Ho Family Foundation and the Ernst Göhner Foundation.

The exhibition sets out from the basic premise that there is no such thing as a single, uniform Buddhism. Instead, a large variety of themes, works of art, stories, and individual voices are brought together to reflect the multifaceted nature of Buddhism.

Visitors can choose between different thematic “paths” through the exhibition. For this purpose, we have put together various discovery tours. Additionally, every Friday between 3 and 5 pm experts are present in the exhibition to discuss Buddhist art, traditions, and concepts with visitors in personal exchanges. A Sound Memory game playfully introduces listeners to the acoustic dimension of Buddhism. Besides that, you can brood over Zen Buddhist riddles, create an origami lotus flower, or assemble a personal collection of lucky symbols at print stations across the exhibition.

The exhibition does without a classic catalogue. Instead, an “ABC of Buddhism” has been realized in cooperation with researchers of the Center for Religious Studies (CERES) of the Ruhr Universität Bochum. The publication provides in-depth information on a wide range of Buddhist themes and is available for consultation in the exhibition. Copies to take home are on sale at the ticket office.

The curatorial team includes Johannes Beltz (Deputy Director and Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art), Anna Hagdorn (Head of Religion and Culture), Alexandra von Przychowsky (Curator for China and the Himalayas), and Caroline Spicker (Head of Art Education).

**For more information** [rietberg.ch/nirvana\\_en](http://rietberg.ch/nirvana_en)

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