



BUDDHIST RITUAL ART OF TIBET, A HANDBOOK ON CEREMONIAL OBJECTS AND RITUAL FURNISHINGS IN THE TIBETAN TEMPLE

By Michael Henss

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Reviewed by Eric J. Hoffman

High up in the shadows of the Himalayas lies the enigmatic country of Tibet. Buddhist rituals are of supreme importance to the Tibetans, exerting a strong influence over every aspect of their lives, including its arts. To make sense of the many ritual objects, icons, and motifs—some of which have found their way into western jewelry—is a major undertaking, one that is successfully accomplished by Henss' thorough and comprehensive book.

Divided into 18 chapters illustrating and describing more than 600 items, it begins with the two best known ritual objects of Tibetan Buddhism, the *vajra* thunderbolt and the *ghanta* bell. But it doesn't stop there. The eight lucky Buddhist symbols receive a thorough treatment; some of its motifs, such as the



Vajra thunderbolt ritual weapon and ghanta auspicious bell.

Endless Knot, appear in contemporary jewelry. Detailed descriptions and gorgeous photographs show headpieces, crowns, utensils for the offering altar, masks, amulets, mirrors, magic daggers, mandalas, torii sculptures, prayer objects, votive tablets, sacrificial vessels, “butter lamps,” oracle crowns, stupas, spirit traps, ritual vases, textiles, furniture, symbolic emblems, prayer wheels, and more. The origin, use, meaning, and stylistic development of each are carefully described and explained. Rare oral explanations (some of them previously protected by tantric secrecy) from high-ranking Tibetan masters supplement the many historical and modern text sources.

The Tibetan artisan's techniques mostly involve metal casting but also forging, repoussé, chasing, gilding, painting, and cloisonné, as well as work in fabric and bone (sometimes human bone of revered Buddhist monks). This book takes a deep dive into the creation and fabrication of these ritual objects; one example of the level of detail is a state-of-the-art (and rarely seen) neutron radiography peek inside a bronze stupa.



Bone apron used in Buddhist ceremonies and dance.

Michael Henss is an art historian, scholar, and author focusing on Asian art, especially that of Buddhism and Tibet. His previous book, the massive two-volume *Cultural Monuments of Tibet*, won wide acclaim. Now follows this eagerly awaited handbook, a must-have for all who wish to appreciate and understand Buddhist art objects.



Phurba ritual weapon with crowned faces.