

A Study of Visitors to  
*In the Realm of the Buddha:*  
*The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection*  
And  
*Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen*  
At the Freer and Sackler Galleries



Office of Policy and Analysis  
Smithsonian Institution  
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Cover images:

Left: "Padmasambhava, Pema Jungne," pigmented cloth (thangka). Rubin Museum Of Art, New York

Right: "Khadiravani (Green or Yellow) Tara," gilt copper alloy Buddha sculpture, 17th century, central Tibet. Alice S. Kandell Collection. Photo by Neil Greentree, Freer And Sackler Galleries

## Preface

*In the Realm of the Buddha* featured two exhibitions, *The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection* and *Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen*, and displayed precious objects of Tibetan art at the Sackler Gallery from March 13 to July 18, 2010. Both exhibits revealed the works of spiritual masters and artists in ways that awakened many visitors to cultural, aesthetic and religious aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. In fact, the sculptures, thangkas, furniture and ritual objects in *The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection* and the paintings and sculptures in *Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen* walked the line between art and religion. While the objects, ideas and teachings conveyed new perspectives and offered glimpses of the Buddhist philosophy and practice, they encouraged many visitors to experience a spiritual understanding that the academic treatment of Buddhist art can contribute to, but not complete.

The study was directed by Kathleen M. Ernst, a senior research analyst at the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A). She was assisted by two OP&A analysts: Lance Costello and Ikuko Uetani. Megan Lee, Rachel Haswell, and Alexis VanZalen, interns, contributed greatly to the data collection and analysis. Interns Givi Khidesheli, Eliza Kleintop, Lydia Rafferty, Benjamin Wilson and Jessica Holzberg collected data and engaged in observation. The interns were part of a large group that energized our office and contributed to a number of studies. I thank them all.

I am grateful to the museum's Director of Education, Claire Orogos, and to the two curators, Debra Diamond and Stephen Allee, who provided the background information on the exhibition and often seek our office's assistance in ascertaining visitors' reactions to their work. Their interest in and affection for visitors shows. I also thank the Director of the Freer and Sackler Galleries, Julian Raby, for his lively, deep-felt need to explore visitors' characteristics and thoughts regarding most of the exhibitions held at the Freer and Sackler Galleries. By exhibiting a variety of engaging themes such as self discovery, ancient exchanges among nations, gardens as cosmos, and so on, visitors connect with themselves and others, become humbled by objects made thousands of years ago, shed assumptions, reach for greater understanding, and even change fixed views.

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## Background

One of the major exhibitions at the Smithsonian's Freer+Sackler Galleries (FSG) during the summer of 2010, *In the Realm of the Buddha* was on display from March 13 to July 18. The exhibition was comprised of two shows, both on the subject matter of sacred Buddhist art, but which used contrasting approaches to exhibiting the artwork they contained.

The main goal of *The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection* (*The Tibetan Shrine* or *The Shrine*) was to display Buddhist artwork in a way that simulated the sacred context it was originally created for. The gallery was a small room where more than two hundred objects – bronze sculptures, thangkas (scroll paintings), ritual objects, textile banners, and painted furniture – from different Buddhist artistic schools throughout the twelfth through nineteenth centuries were placed according to a hierarchy that reflected the objects' religious importance. The objects were thus arranged as they would be in an authentic Tibetan shrine, and not according to date, geographic region or other categories typically used to group art. A background soundtrack of chanting and dim lighting added to the effect of being in a real shrine.

*Lama, Patron, Artist: the Great Situ Panchen* (*Situ Panchen*) was on loan from the Rubin Museum in New York as part of the Sackler Gallery's Asia in America program, which showcases the holdings of important American institutional collections of Asian art. This exhibit's approach was to use the sculptures, thangkas and other Tibetan Buddhist religious works to tell the life story of the eighteenth century artist and artistic patron Situ Panchen, considered by the Karma Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhists to be an incarnate lama. Although its labels and panels did not explain the religious or iconographic aspects of the artwork, they demonstrated Panchen's role as an important and influential artist, patron, and religious figure.

Reactions to *In the Realm of Buddha* in the press, and especially to the strong religious associations of *The Shrine*, were intense and varied. Lee Lawrence, in an article in the *Wall Street Journal* on June 9, 2010, lauded the Sackler for not "drawing strict lines between what is secular, cultural, aesthetic and religious, [something that] risks doing damage to the appreciation and understanding of many forms of art," and instead praised the Museum for providing a "fruitful first step in thinking through the role of sacred art in what has become [a] kind of borderland space – that corner of the public square we call 'the art museum.'" However, there were other critics, such as the *Washington Post's* Blake Gopnik, who were skeptical that

*The Shrine* posed a “challenge to our museum’s secular traditions.” In his review of March 21, 2010, Gopnik suggested that the publicly-funded Smithsonian was inappropriately creating a “space for the increase and diffusion of religion” through having Buddhist religious leaders bless the space when it opened, inviting visitors to take off their shoes before entering “as an act of devotion,” and pitching the “greater glories of the Buddhist faith” in the book sold in conjunction with the exhibit.

Because of such strong reactions to the religious aspects of *The Shrine*, FSG was particularly interested in understanding the public’s reaction to the exhibit, especially in relation to the issues discussed above. To this end, it requested that the Smithsonian’s Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) incorporate these concerns into a visitor study of *In the Realm of Buddha*. Other aspects of the exhibition the study focused on understanding if visitors:

- came away with strong emotional experiences,
- were provoked to deep thought by the exhibit,
- had the tools they needed to dig deeper into the subject on their own,
- understood that *Situ Panchen* and *The Shrine* approached similar kinds of artwork in quite different ways, and whether they thought this pairing worked well, and
- were satisfied with their experiences in the two exhibits.



## Methodology

To study the issues described above, the OP&A study team implemented several types of analysis:

- Quantitative survey: The study team developed a short questionnaire to survey visitor demographics, background information, and satisfaction with the exhibitions.
- Qualitative in-depth interviews: The study team determined that several issues in which the Museum was interested lent themselves to qualitative, in-depth discussions with visitors that would augment quantitative survey data and allow a deeper, more nuanced understanding of visitors' motivations, museum-going preferences, and experiences in the exhibition. The strength of the qualitative methodology is that visitors are able to express their thoughts in their own words and give their opinions without the constraints and limitations that a survey poses; however, the information cannot be used to draw inferences about the views of the overall population of exhibition visitors.
- Content of two visitor comment books: OP&A analyzed two of the three notebooks (a third was missing) which were placed in the entrance area between the two exhibits for visitors to comment in. The comment books were 8.5' by 11' sized notebooks containing blank, unlined pages. There were no guidelines prompting visitors' comments, so the content of the completed books varied. The voluntary quality of the comment books also means that this analysis cannot be seen as representative of the entire visitor population.



# Summary Conclusions and Recommendations

## *Conclusions*

- Visitors preferred *The Tibetan Shrine* over *Situ Panchen*. The unorthodox experiential approach of *The Tibetan Shrine* attracted and interested visitors. The focus on one individual artist and patron in *Situ Panchen*, although an atypical way of exhibiting Buddhist religious artwork, is a familiar mode of presentation in western art.
- In contrast to previous exhibitions at FSG, *The Tibetan Shrine* received above average proportions both of superior ratings (visitors excited by the exhibit) and poor, fair, and good ratings (visitors critical of the exhibit in some way); and a below average proportion of excellent ratings (visitors who were neither excited enough to rate the exhibition superior nor critical to the point of rating it lower). Of particular note was the favorable percentage of general visitors who rated *The Shrine* superior. Typically, as the proportion of visitors who rate an exhibition superior increases, the proportion who mark it poor, fair or good decreases, and vice versa. That is, normally as more visitors are excited by the exhibition, less are critical. Based on the interviews, the study team speculates that the immersive, experiential nature of the exhibit may have been a more accessible way for some visitors, particularly general visitors, to engage with the museum. Conversely, the number of objects and lack of a focal point within *The Shrine* may have been a bit overwhelming or unexpected for other visitors.
- While many visitors viewed *The Shrine* as a sacred space – some personally and others recognizing its sacredness to others – no one took issue with or voiced concerns about having a sacred space in a museum context. It was viewed as an appropriate presentation and gateway to learning about Tibetan Buddhist art and culture.
- Visitors viewed *In the Realm of the Buddha* as an educational tool, as their numerous questions about the Buddhist subject matter of the artwork demonstrate. However, the exhibition did not reach the educational potential it could have because:
  - Visitors wanted more contextual information in *Situ Panchen* – what the artworks were about and the period in which they were painted vs. painting style and technique. (Prior studies at the

Sackler have also shown that visitors want more context and maps.)

- Visitors wanted more orienting information, i.e. about Buddhism, and more information on the individual objects in *The Shrine* (but not at the expense of changing the atmosphere in *The Shrine*.)
- *In the Realm of the Buddha* met two of the FSG guiding principles for visitors: to develop emotional experiences that touch our being and create memories; and to pose provocative questions that incited visitors to investigate. It did not meet the third principle to provide tools that engage visitors to find out more.
- The pairing of the shows was successful from the visitor perspective. Visitors saw them as complementary while appreciating the two very different approaches. This was reinforced in the survey where 20% of survey respondents, when given only two choices of which show to eliminate, took it upon themselves to write in a new third choice not to eliminate either show.

## ***Recommendations***

- If *The Tibetan Shrine* is to be displayed in the future, the Museum should emphasize the educational aspect of the exhibit more strongly so that it is seen unequivocally as a tool for education about Tibetan Buddhist art and culture and Buddhist religion and not a promotional one. This could be done in part by addressing the concerns of visitors that are described in this report:
  - Include more explanatory panels outside of *The Shrine*, e.g., silhouettes of objects with identifying label information.
  - Clarify the size of typical home altars if there are significant differences between home altars and the Museum's shrine.
  - Explain aspects of the exhibit design, such as the source of background music and lighting intended to suggest yak butter candles, which play a large role in influencing visitors' reactions to the exhibit as a cultural experience.

- Incorporate information about Buddhism into the exhibit to address the questions many visitors had about terminology, symbolism, and the other related topics.
- Revisit the Art in America program guidelines to allow the Sackler Gallery to augment the label content that comes from the loaning institution with the kinds of information that the Gallery knows visitors to the Sackler are seeking.



## Quantitative Visitor Survey

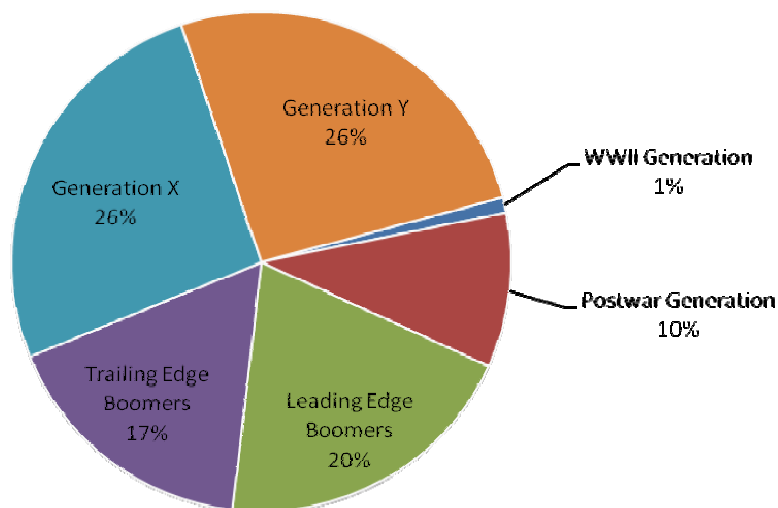
For the survey portion of the study, every visitor<sup>1</sup> exiting the exhibition during four 30-minute segments on each of six days between June 12 and June 29, 2010 was intercepted. A total of 623 visitors completed self-administered survey questionnaires, with a response rate of 82%. A sample of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix A and frequencies of responses to the questions on the survey are provided in Appendix B.

### *Findings: All Surveyed Visitors*

#### Demographics

**Age:** The average age of visitors to *In the Realm of the Buddha* was 43 and the median age was 45. These figures are similar to the average and median ages of FSG exhibitions over the past several years—45 and 47 respectively. Divided by generation, 1% of visitors were from the WWII generation (born 1901-1924), 10% were from the Postwar generation (born 1925-1945); 20% were Leading Edge Baby Boomers (born 1946-1955); 17% were Trailing Edge Baby Boomers (born 1956-1964); 26% were Generation X (born 1965-1981); and 26% were Generation Y (born 1982-2001). (Figure 1)

**Figure 1: Age by Generation**



<sup>1</sup> Excluding visitors under 12 and organized groups

**Sex:** There were more female (56%) than male visitors to *In the Realm of the Buddha*, which is a typical finding in art museums.

**Residence:** The majority of survey respondents were residents of the United States (93%), and the remaining respondents were visiting from another country (7%). About one out of five respondents was a local visitor from the D.C. Metropolitan area (22%).

### **Visitor characteristics**

**Visit history:** Over half of the respondents (57%) were first-time visitors to FSG, and the rest were repeat visitors (43%). Not surprisingly, the youngest age group (12-30) contained the highest percentage of first-time visitors to FSG (75% vs. 58% of visitors age 31-50 and 46% of visitors over the age of 51). Four-fifths of the local visitors (80%) were making a repeat visit to FSG.

**Groups and individual visitors:** Almost four in five visitors were accompanied by at least one other person (78%) and just over one in five was visiting alone (22%). Repeat visitors were more likely to be visiting alone (29%) than first-time visitors (18%).

**Specificity of visit:** About two out of five respondents (37%) said they came specifically to see *In the Realm of the Buddha*. These visitors will be referred to as *exhibition specific visitors*.

- Older visitors were more likely than younger visitors to be *exhibition specific visitors* (44% of visitors over the age of 51 compared to 38% of visitors ages 31-50 and 27% of visitors ages 12-30).
- Repeat visitors were more likely than first-time visitors to be *exhibition specific visitors*. Just over half of repeat visitors were *exhibition specific visitors* (53%), compared to one in four first time visitor. (26%).
- Local visitors were more likely to be *exhibition specific visitors* (60% vs. 31% of non-locals).

### **Interest in Buddhism and Tibetan/Himalayan art**

**Interest in Buddhism:** When asked how interested they were in Buddhism, about one sixth of visitors (16%) marked *not interested at all*, half indicated that they were *somewhat interested* (51%) and one third indicated that they were *very interested* (33%).

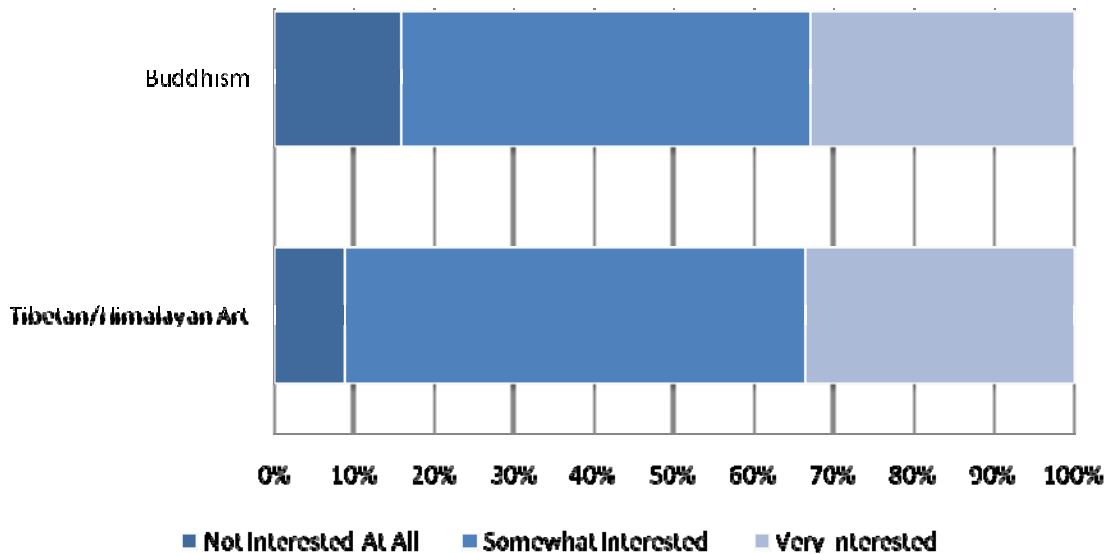


- *Exhibition specific visitors* were more likely to be *very interested* in Buddhism (47% vs. 25% of general visitors).
- Repeat visitors were more likely to indicate that they were *very interested* in Buddhism (39% vs. 29% of first-time visitors), and first time visitors were more likely to indicate that they were *not interested at all* (21% vs. 9% of repeat visitors).

**Interest in Tibetan/Himalayan art:** With regard to interest in Tibetan/Himalayan Art, one in ten respondents (9%) indicated that they were *not interested at all*, about three in five (58%) said they were *somewhat interested* and about one in three noted they were *very interested* (34%). (Figure 2)

- *Exhibition specific visitors* were more likely to be *very interested* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art (47% vs. 26% of general visitors).
- Repeat visitors were more likely to indicate that they were *very interested* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art (43% vs. 28% first-time visitors), and first-time visitors were more likely to indicate that they were *not interested at all* (10% vs. 5% of repeat visitors).

**Figure 2: Visitors’ Interests**

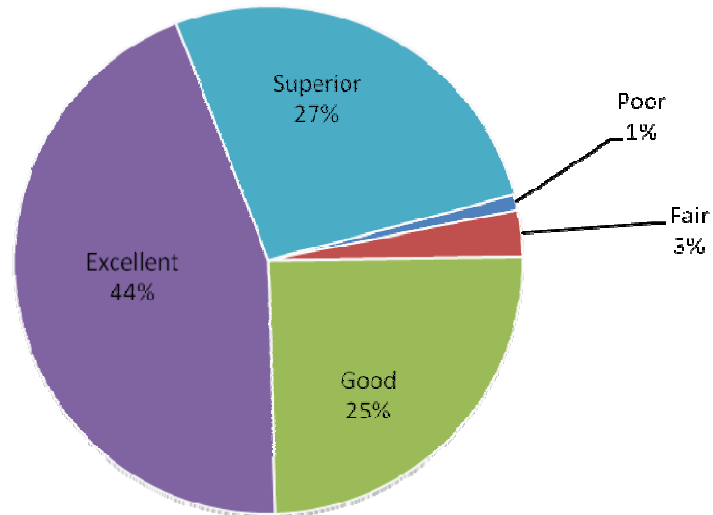


## ***Findings: The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection***

### **Satisfaction**

When asked to rate their experience in *The Tibetan Shrine*, 27% of respondents rated it superior, 45% excellent, 25% good, 3% fair and 1% poor. (Figure 3)

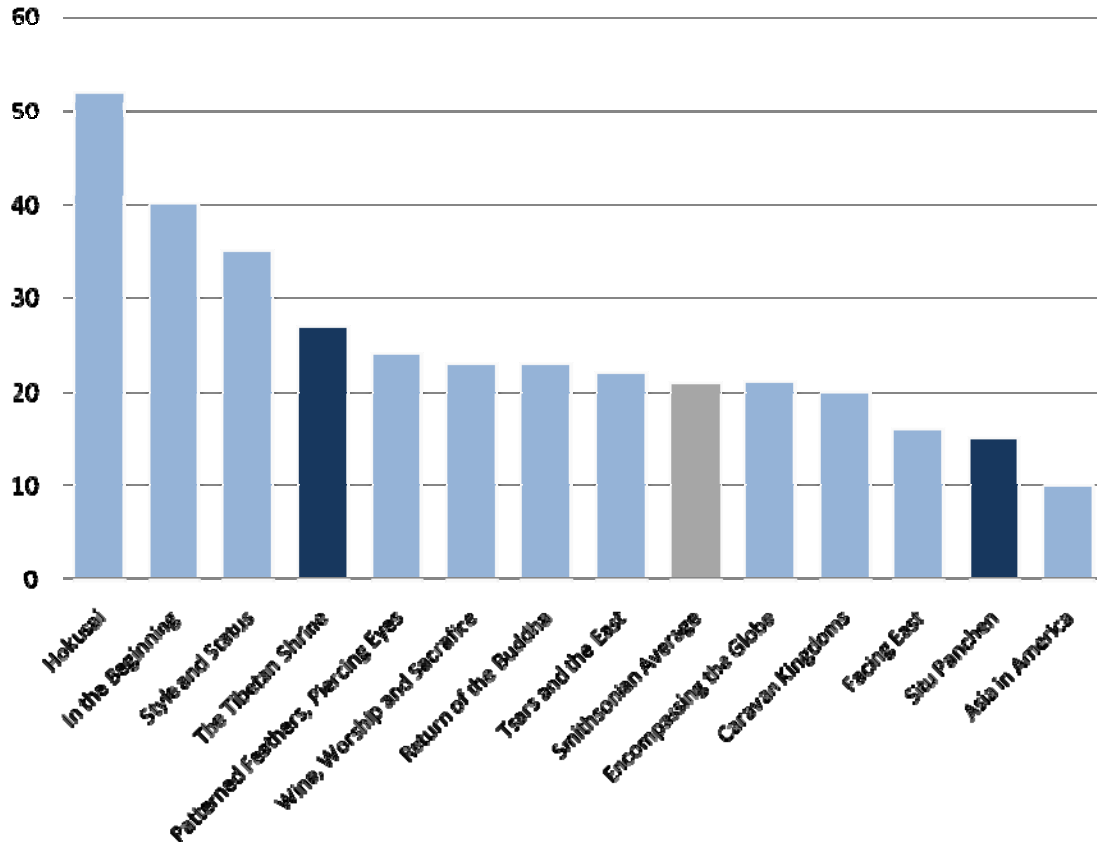
**Figure 3: Visitor Satisfaction Ratings for *The Tibetan Shrine***



***Superior ratings:*** *The Tibetan Shrine's* 27% superior rating was higher than *Asia in America* (10%), and *Facing East* (16%); it exceeded the Smithsonian average (21%); was comparable to *Caravan Kingdoms* (20%), *Encompassing the Globe* (21%), *Tsars and the East* (22%), *Return of the Buddha* (23%), *Wine, Worship and Sacrifice* (23%), and *Patterned Feathers, Piercing Eyes* (24%); and was lower than *Style and Status* (35%), *In the Beginning* (40%) and *Hokusai* (52%). (Figure 4)

- Those who visited FSG specifically to see the *In the Realm of the Buddha* were more likely to rate *The Tibetan Shrine* as superior (35% of exhibition specific visitors vs. 23% of general visitors).

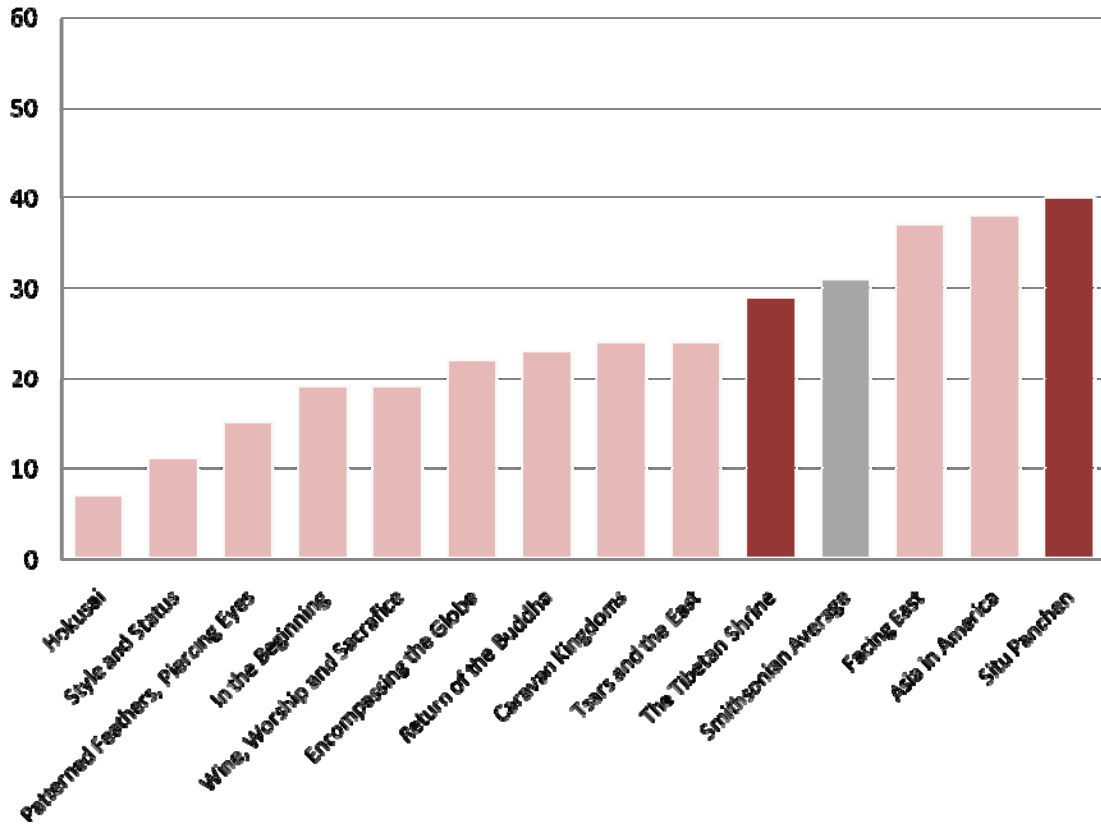
**Figure 4: Superior Ratings at FSG (in percent)**



**Lower ratings:** Combining all respondents who rated the exhibition poor, fair or good, 29% of visitors rated *The Tibetan Shrine* less than excellent. This is lower than the figures for *Asia in America* (38%) and *Facing East* (37%); close to the Smithsonian Average (31%); comparable to *Tsars and the East* (24%), *Caravan Kingdoms* (24%), *Return of the Buddha* (23%) and *Encompassing the Globe* (22%). *Wine, Worship and Sacrifice* (19%), *In the Beginning* (19%), *Patterned Feathers, Piercing Eyes* (15%), *Style and Status* (11%) and *Hokusai* (7%), had the least number of lower ratings. (Figure 5)

- Respondents who indicated they were *not interested at all* in Buddhism or Tibetan/Himalayan Art were more likely to give *The Tibetan Shrine* a poor, fair or good rating (56% of those who were *not interested at all* in Buddhism and 61% of those *not interested at all* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art).

**Figure 5: Poor, Fair and Good Ratings at FSG (in percent)**

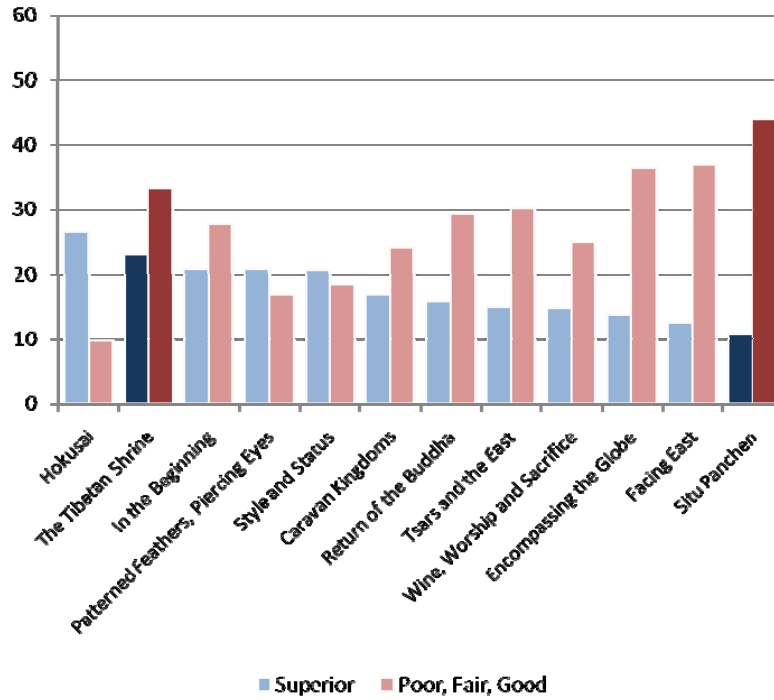


**Ratings by general and exhibition specific visitors:** Comparing the ratings of general (Figure 6) and *exhibition specific* visitors (Figure 7) to the median ratings recorded over the previous ten FSG exhibitions studied by OP&A:

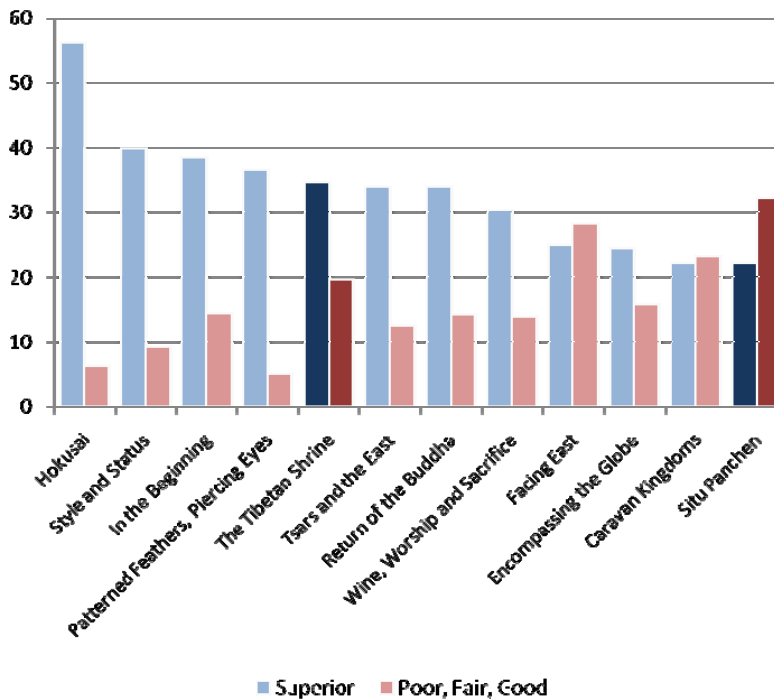
- The percent of general visitors who rated *The Tibetan Shrine* as superior (23%) exceeded the median<sup>2</sup>.
- The percent of general visitors who rated *The Tibetan Shrine* as poor, fair or good (33%) also exceeded the median.
- The percent of *exhibition specific* visitors who rated *The Tibetan Shrine* as superior (35%) was very close to the median.
- The percent of *exhibition specific* visitors who rated *The Tibetan Shrine* as poor, fair or good (20%) exceeded the median. (Figure 7).

<sup>2</sup> Over the previous ten FSG exhibitions studied by OP&A, the median percentage of general visitors who rated the exhibition as superior was 16.5% and as poor, fair, or good was 26.5%. Among exhibition specific visitors, the median for superior was 34% and for poor, fair or good was 14%.

**Figure 6: Superior and Poor, Fair and Good Ratings by General Visitors at FSG (in percent)**



**Figure 7: Superior and Poor, Fair and Good Ratings by Exhibition-Specific Visitors at FSG (in percent)**



### Amount of information in *The Tibetan Shrine*:

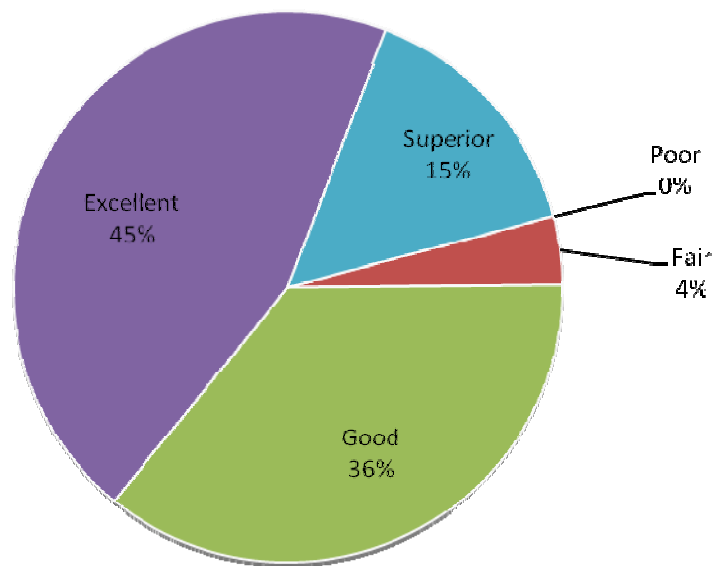
A little under four out of five respondents (78%) thought that the amount of information in *The Tibetan Shrine* was *just right*, just under one in five (18%) thought the amount of information was *too little* and very few (4%) thought that the exhibit had *too much* information.

### Findings: Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen

#### Satisfaction

When asked to rate their experience in *Situ Panchen*, 15% of respondents rated it superior, 45% excellent, 36% good, 4% fair, and 0% poor. (Figure 8)

Figure 8: Visitor Satisfaction Ratings for *Situ Panchen*



**Superior ratings:** *Situ Panchen's* 15% superior rating was comparable to that of *Asia in America* (10%), and *Facing East* (16%); below the Smithsonian average (21%); and below that of *Caravan Kingdoms* (20%), *Encompassing the Globe* (21%), *Tsars and the East* (22%), *Return of the Buddha* (23%), *Wine, Worship and Sacrifice* (23%), *Patterned Feathers, Piercing Eyes* (24%), *Style and Status* (35%), *In the Beginning* (40%) and *Hokusai* (52%). (Figure 4)

- Those who were visiting FSG specifically to see *In the Realm of the Buddha* were more likely to rate *Situ Panchen* as superior (22% of *exhibition specific* visitors vs. 11% of general visitors).

**Lower ratings:** Combining all respondents who rated the exhibition poor, fair or good, 40% of visitors rated *Situ Panchen* less than excellent. This is comparable to the figures for *Asia in America* (38%) and *Facing East* (37%); above the Smithsonian Average (31%), *Caravan Kingdoms* (24%), *Tsars and the East* (24%), *Return of the Buddha* (23%) and *Encompassing the Globe* (22%). *In the Beginning* (19%), *Wine, Worship and Sacrafice* (19%), *Patterned Feathers, Piercing Eyes* (15%), *Style and Status* (11%) and *Hokusai* (7%), had the least number of lower ratings. (Figure 5)

- Those who indicated they were *not interested at all* in Buddhism or Tibetan/Himalayan Art were more likely to give *Situ Panchen* a poor, fair or good rating (60% of those who were *not interested at all* in Buddhism and 67% of those *not interested at all* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art).

### ***Situ Panchen* on loan**

About one in eight respondents (13%) were aware that *Situ Panchen* was on loan from another museum *before* their visit. More than half (55%) became aware *during* their visit and the remaining third (32%) became aware *when they saw the survey question*.<sup>3</sup>

- Repeat visitors were more likely to have known *before* their visit (25% vs. 7% of first-time visitors). Conversely, first time visitors were more likely to realize *after* reading the survey question (40% vs. 25% of repeat visitors).
- Older visitors were more likely than younger visitors to have known *before* visiting the exhibit (20% of those age 51+, 31% of those age 31-50 and 12% of those age 12-30).
- Not surprisingly, *exhibition specific* visitors were more likely to have known *before* visiting (29% vs. 4% of general visitors).
- Local visitors were more likely to have known *before* visiting (24% vs. 10% of non-locals).

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<sup>3</sup> Approximately halfway through surveying, the text panel outside the gallery was changed to include a paragraph about the Sackler Gallery's *Asia in America* program. There was virtually no change in the number of people who became aware of the loan *during* their visits.

## ***Findings: Comparison of Exhibits***

### **Which exhibit would you cut?**

Respondents were asked which of the exhibitions they would cut if they had to eliminate one. Among those who selected one of the two options, seven in ten (70%) opted to eliminate *Situ Panchen* and the remaining three in ten (30%) said they would cut *The Tibetan Shrine*.

However, many visitors felt so strongly that they *would not eliminate either exhibit* that they took it upon themselves to write-in a third option. One in five respondents (20%) wrote in an answer that indicated this preference to the options provided by the survey. When including these respondents, slightly more than half of visitors said they would cut *Situ Panchen* (56%) and about one quarter said they would cut *The Tibetan Shrine* (24%). All of the following are based on respondents who chose to eliminate one of the exhibits or wrote down that they would *eliminate neither exhibit*.

- Repeat visitors were more likely than first-time visitors to indicate that they would *eliminate neither* (28% vs. 14%).
- Visitors who were *very interested* in Buddhism or *very interested* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art were more likely to cut *Situ Panchen* than *The Tibetan Shrine* (49% vs. 19% and 43% vs. 24%, respectively).
- Those who were *very interested* in Buddhism were more likely to write-in that they would *eliminate neither exhibit* (32% vs. 16% of those who were *somewhat interested* and 10% of those who were *not interested at all*).
- Similarly, those who were *very interested* in Tibetan/Himalayan Art were more likely than those who were *not interested at all* to write-in that they would *eliminate neither exhibit* (33% vs. 14%).
- Those who gave *Situ Panchen* a poor, fair or good rating were more likely to choose to cut that exhibit (69%).

## ***Discussion***

Overall, visitors showed above average satisfaction with *The Tibetan Shrine* and below-average satisfaction with *Situ Panchen*. Surveyed visitors also showed a preference for *The Tibetan Shrine* exhibition over *Situ Panchen* exhibition, in responses to the question *if you had to eliminate one of the two exhibitions, which would you cut?*



*Exhibition specific visitors* generally give higher ratings because they are more knowledgeable of and interested in the topic of the exhibition than general visitors. This held true for the two exhibitions.

Compared to recent FSG exhibitions, *The Tibetan Shrine* received a higher than average proportion of superior ratings from general visitors. This suggests that general visitors enjoyed the immersive, experiential aspects of *The Shrine*. *The Shrine* also received a higher proportion of poor, fair, and good ratings from both general and *exhibition specific visitors*. The study team speculates that the number of objects within the exhibition may have been a bit overwhelming for these visitors.

When asked to choose between eliminating *The Tibetan Shrine* and *Situ Panchen*, many respondents felt compelled to hand-write that they would eliminate neither of the exhibitions. Had that option existed on the survey, it is very probable that more people would have chosen to eliminate neither of the exhibitions.



## Qualitative In-Depth Interviews with Visitors

During the time *In the Realm of the Buddha* was on display at FSG, the OP&A study team conducted semi-structured, qualitative interviews with visitors exiting the exhibition. In conducting the interviews, staff used an interview guide developed in consultation with FSG executive, curatorial, education and docent staff (Appendix C). This guide served as a base for questioning visitors; however, visitors were encouraged to talk freely about any topic covered by the exhibition.

Some features of the interviewees are as follows:

- 25 interviews comprising 37 people
- 25 women and 12 men
- Age range from 15 to 70.
- Slightly more than one-third repeat visitors to FSG
- Half local and half non-local
- Visitors from across the U.S and world (two men from Thailand, a woman and man from the United Kingdom, and a woman from Australia participated in the interviews)
- Seven practicing Buddhists; the majority had little or no background with the subject matter
- At least four interviewees worked in some capacity in the art world: a curator, a production manager, an artist, and a paint conservator

### ***Findings: Visitors' Experiences in The Tibetan Shrine***

Interviewees responded to *The Shrine* as a space unlike other exhibits, for it was the immersive experience in *The Shrine*, rather than just the 220 objects, that visitors appreciated. A woman in her 40s said, "The feeling. More the feeling than the information for me. *The Shrine* was the best," and a man in his 20s remarked, "The music in the back was really relaxing and calming. It really makes you feel like you're there with the monks chanting. You're really enveloped in the whole." Another person elaborated:

*The Shrine is not meant to be a [typical] exhibit. Situ Panchen is an exhibit where you're supposed to look at different pieces of art which are all in their individual boxes, but The Shrine is its own area. It's in its own box. I think that*

*you're not supposed to be focusing on the little things, like 'oh look at that little deity.' It's more of a place where you can think about yourself and reflect.*

Washington Post art critic Blake Gopnik criticized this aspect of *The Shrine*, saying that “we museumgoers aren't obliged to act like long-dead Tibetans. We may want to see and analyze the objects on display in detail, to our own secular ends – that's what art museums are for, after all. And in that case, this ‘shrine’ will not do the trick.”<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, not one of the visitors interviewed for this qualitative study voiced any objection to not being able to examine the objects in *The Shrine* more closely. Rather they expressly said they would not want more information inside *The Shrine* (though some offered suggestions for providing more information outside of *The Shrine* as described below.)

Interviewees saw the atmosphere inside *The Shrine* as a feature that enhanced their experience. They were eager to describe contemplative experiences they had in *The Shrine*, and used such descriptive words as peaceful, serene atmosphere, refreshing and calming. Two different interviewees said they felt “positive energy” and a “deep compassionate presence.” Representative comments include:

15 year-old girl 1: *That was amazing. There is so much stuff in that space with The Shrine and I felt compelled to be totally silent and just look around and see it. Just take it in. it was very beautiful... So many of the faces of the little sculptures and the dim lights just made it feel like you walked into another world. It was really silent and peaceful with the gold everywhere.*

15 year-old girl 2: *Yes. It was like meditating. I just wanted to sit there and expose myself to it.*

\* \* \*

Woman, 30s, art curator: *It was very peaceful. The soundtrack was very beautiful. And quite an overwhelming sense of otherworldliness ... definitely something special... yeah I think within a museum context its hard to take it to that extra dimension, so already you feel as though you're in a special place when you're in a museum – beautiful things, treated with care and respect and so forth. But that display, that shrine, it has an additional kind of feeling of something spiritual or something otherworldly to us. And the presentation was very beautiful with the lighting and the respectful nature that came across – things weren't brightly lit and you were able to get in but only so far but far enough to feel enclosed.*

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<sup>4</sup> Gopnik, Blake. 2010. “‘The Tibetan Shrine’ puts relics in original light.” *The Washington Post*, March 21.

\* \* \*

Woman, 60s: *I liked the multisensory aspect of it, the music in the background, the lighting, the carpeting, everything about it. Just feeling like I was in the middle of ... just transported.*

\* \* \*

Woman, 30s, originally from India: *It was beautiful. I did not want to come out of The Shrine to be honest. I just wanted to sit there. Something about it is very familiar; I don't know what, perhaps some kind of past life connection? Even the chants that were playing sounded very familiar to me. I wanted to spend more time there, I wish I could.*

\* \* \*

Man, 60s: *There is a special feeling when you walk in there. I think because you have a separate entrance and little lighting. You've made it similar to a temple. I think when you walk in there you have the background music which is quite calming and I think it works.*

Visitors recognized that *The Shrine* was transplanted – “Even though it's constructed, artificial, it's still peaceful. They did a good job” – yet not taken so far out of context that it would fail to offer a comparable experience to being in a real shrine. A Buddhist monk said that *The Shrine* was very similar to his temple in Maryland, and a few others had been to shrines in Asia which they compared to *The Tibetan Shrine*.

A number of interviewees had never been to a shrine and were appreciative of being able to see a Buddhist shrine in a museum context – *The Tibetan Shrine* gave them a level of comfort in viewing a different religion. One said, “I don't have to be an awkward tourist going into a temple,” and another explained,

*I feel more correct viewing the shrine here. If I was entering a shrine somewhere else I would feel more like a gawker. It would be for curiosity's sake, so it would be somewhat of an invasion on another shrine.*

### **Sacredness of *The Tibetan Shrine***

An issue raised by Blake Gopnik's review in *The Washington Post* was whether the Museum was “pitching its shrine as a genuinely sacred place” and in doing so, overstepping the bounds of a publicly-funded institution. The interviews attempted to ascertain if visitors felt *The Shrine* was indeed a sacred space, and if so, if this posed any problem for them.

The sacredness of *The Shrine* was a very engaging topic and visitors shared their feelings about it in depth. All of the practicing Buddhists as well as most others who had no background with Buddhism saw *The Shrine* as a sacred place – whether they felt it was personally sacred or recognized that it could be sacred to others. Visitors attributed their feelings of sacredness to the atmosphere inside *The Shrine* produced in large part by the chanting, rich gold and red colors, and dim lighting (see above). When asked if they felt *The Shrine* was a sacred space, several interviewees responded positively with quick assurance:

Q: *So you see it as a sacred space?*

Couple, 20s: *(together) yeah!*

\* \* \*

Q: *Even though it's inside of the museum do you still feel that it is a sacred place to worship?*

A: *It still is. Just because it is in a different area doesn't mean that it doesn't have the same meaning to it. It's a whole shrine, and it could be anywhere and people could still have that sacred feeling.*

\* \* \*

*It definitely is a sacred place. It is a shrine where normally people would be going every day and praying, and I think that it's cool that people can experience that as outsiders. I think that they can really connect with it. It gives them a personal view of what it would be like to be inside of [a real] shrine.*

\* \* \*

Q: *Do you think The Shrine is a sacred space?*

Woman, 20s, identified as Mormon: *Yes. When you go in there you feel like you pay respect... it's not a place to goof around...it's special.*

However, some interviewees did not associate their experience in *The Shrine* with sacredness at all. The few interviewees who did not see *The Shrine* as sacred said they could not get that feeling inside of a museum either due to distractions or due to a secular feeling that a museum inherently evokes to them. Others described cultural barriers, as one woman in her 50s explained:

*I wasn't really so much [feeling The Shrine was sacred]. I got a little bit of that feeling with the background vibrations, chanting... but I don't know. I've had this problem before in going to Buddhist shrines. It's the gap between that culture and that spirit I have a hard time bridging as a westerner and it doesn't*

*immediately feel “sacred” to me. I like the calm, I like the general feeling of it, but it’s not a spiritual kind of reaction that I have.*

Still other interviewees did not personally find *The Shrine* to be sacred, but acknowledged its sacredness to others:

*Woman, 60s: I think for anyone who is a Buddhist or knows more about it, then yes. For me, I’m observing it, appreciating that it is very special to those people as perhaps a Buddhist looking into an Anglican church might look at it but not take on board all the significance of it. Respect it.*

\* \* \*

*Man, 70s: I recognize it as a sacred place for Tibetan Buddhists, but I am comfortable with Tibetan Buddhism... I don't feel contemptuous of any parts of it nor do I feel that I might profane any parts of it. For instance, I would not go into certain religious establishments if I felt that I myself was contemptuous of it.*

Universally, the interviewees in this study – those who did and did not feel that *The Shrine* was a sacred place – said that they did not have an issue with *The Tibetan Shrine* being in a museum setting: “No, not at all. I would imagine anyone that would be coming to an exhibit like this would not be offended by that, rather might find it nice as part of the experience.” Other representative comments include:

*Q: Do you think anyone could be offended by a sacred space being in a museum?*

*Woman, 20s: I don’t see why they should because that’s the whole point of the museum... to give people a better understanding of what is going on in the world. So if someone was offended by that I think that would be a little ridiculous. But there are... you know, some weirdoes out there.*

\* \* \*

*Man, 70s: No. It’s part of the exhibit. It includes the art and it would be the same if [it] were anybody else’s shrine, any other religion’s shrine. It would be perfectly acceptable in a museum.*

Visitors felt the exhibit presented historical and cultural information that would not provoke anyone to judge it as inappropriate or bothersome. The exhibit did not force a religion on the visitor; rather it placed *The Shrine* in its historical context and allowed visitors to draw their own conclusions about the religion. Some visitors divulged their own religions (Christian, Catholic, and Mormon, to name a few) and

argued strongly against how this shrine could be problematic for anyone of any other or no religion. Buddhists who were interviewed claimed that it would not be problematic for them. As two different interviewees emphasized:

*You can look at it objectively. You could go in there and say 'this is how someone would practice.' As someone who is trying to practice Buddhism, I would get a deeper meaning; however, it could be objective. Someone who didn't know [about the religion] wouldn't be offended and say 'this is too religious' because it's definitely very historical.*

\* \* \*

*The craftsmanship and the artistic beauty of the work are very paramount, so it's not like the religious aspect is the thing that is on display. You know that you're saved from the religious aspect. In particular, I like the two brightly lit sculptures that sit outside, which enable you to really assess at close range the detail and the workmanship of those objects. Then inside there are 200 plus sculptures of equivalent quality. That was really nice to go in and see and then come out and have the opportunity for closer study without having all of those objects equally exposed. I think it's appropriate.*

Worship or meditation was not uncommon among the visitors, Buddhist or not, and some wished that benches had been included for the purpose of meditation.

*Perhaps if the space was deeper you could fit some benches. You would have to put them off to the side because you wouldn't want to block people who are just looking at it as art per se.*

While not all visitors would necessarily meditate or worship in the space, no interviewees in the study expressed concern about anyone else engaging in such practices, as the following exchange with a woman in her 50s illustrates:

Q: *Is it a place that you would worship or meditate?*

A: *Probably not.*

Q: *Why not?*

A: *I never have slowed down to meditate...*

Q: *So anywhere you could meditate – not just in this space?*

A: *Exactly – I did notice that someone had been sitting there – he appeared to be sitting there for quite a while and didn't seem to be bothered by people walking in and out.*



Q: *Do you think that's appropriate?*

A: *Sure.*

### **Information in *The Tibetan Shrine***

Interviewees strongly urged against putting any signage inside *The Shrine* because it would disrupt the atmosphere that had been created. However, a number of interviewees did want additional information and suggested various ways of providing it.

*That kind of takes away from the whole shrine feel and the natural flow of things in a shrine if you have labels everywhere, but personally I like to know what I'm looking at... you said there's a book... Even if you have silhouettes of figures with information on the wall right outside of the room – figure one is this, figure two is this... because a lot of people see the books and [think] "oh I don't want to open a book and read it, I'm too lazy to do that."*

\* \* \*

*The signage could address the different styles going on in *The Shrine*: the wooden boxes, etc. I noticed that the pieces were different, but didn't understand how they fit.*

\* \* \*

*Currently, the signage gives a very specific representation and not a general representation. If you don't know about Buddhism you might think that all Buddhism is one way.*

\* \* \*

*I would like to see a short introduction to modern Buddhism.*

### ***Findings: Visitors' Experiences in Situ Panchen***

#### **Visitors' understanding of the exhibition**

Most visitors understood what the exhibition *Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen* was about: a school of paintings. Interviewees generally said that the exhibit's focus was Situ Panchen and the encampment style of painting.

*To me the exhibit is exploring this one artist and patron as well as this one style of art, this Buddhist style of painting. There are different examples of that in the exhibit.*

\* \* \*

*It is very art historical. There is less about who the figures are and less about the religious dimensions of the paintings, but a lot about the styles of paintings.*

Several interviewees commented on the Chinese and Indian influences they saw in the paintings or learned about in the exhibition. Despite the majority of interviewees seeing it as a historical exhibition, there were some who focused on the Buddhism aspect of the exhibition, for example saying it was about one sect of Buddhism.

### **Response to a loaned show**

*Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen* was on loan from the Rubin Museum of Art in New York through the Sackler Gallery's Asia in America program. As part of the program, the Sackler agrees not to substantially alter the lending institution's presentation and interpretation/text labels; therefore, the scholarship, choice of artwork, and labels in the show were all produced by the Rubin. The FSG staff was interested to know if visitors were aware of this distinction and how satisfied they were with the level and content of information in the exhibition.

About half of the interviewees recognized that Situ Panchen was on loan from the Rubin Museum in New York and some had even been to the Rubin Museum and seen this particular exhibition there. The fact that it was not part of the Freer+Sackler Galleries' collection did not affect the way that visitors, even frequent or repeat visitors, viewed the display.

### **Signage**

Visitors craved contextual information and explanations of the symbolism and what was being depicted in the artworks – in other words, a different kind of information than was provided by the signage. That is not to say all visitors did not appreciate the Rubin's labels, for example a woman in her 50s who said, "I was really interested in the technique that was used with pigments on cloth and how that was done. I tend to take a little more academic interest in those things..." Nonetheless, most interviewees had only a passing or limited background with Buddhist iconography and even less background with Situ Panchen and the encampment style. For this reason, the scholarly approach of the label information was not what they wanted. Representative comments are:

*I would like the labels to explain exactly what some of the deities represented or what the images actually depicted. A lot of times it would say this represents*

*the encampment style or tell how the artist painted it, but I never knew what the picture actually was depicting.*

\* \* \*

*Man: I kept looking for answers in the signage because I wasn't as interested in the artist as in what was going on in the paintings.*

*Woman: We are essentially laypeople, we're not experts, not scholars. Maybe those people's needs are met by the signage, but I felt like I was a little hungry. That wasn't what I wanted in the signage.*

\* \* \*

*The information on the signs really is for a scholar. If you want your audience to be the scholar, then that's fine. If you want the general public, who have a passing interest in Buddhism and Asian art to be the audience, then the signage should have been more about what was going on in the paintings.*

\* \* \*

*Woman, 20s: I would imagine that for your average American walking in there, they would just have no way to understand that. So a little something about what's going on with the four heads, what's going on with all the different arms, and all that kind of stuff. Even just something very, very brief, I think, might have been helpful.*

### ***Findings: Pairing of the Two Shows***

Interviewees saw *The Tibetan Shrine* and *Situ Panchen* as different but complementary. They described taking away two different experiences from the two displays – while *Situ Panchen* was more of a typical, art historical museum exhibition, *The Shrine* was an experiential one. There was enough overlap between the two for visitors to connect them and not see them as completely separate. Most interviewees when queried said they did not believe that one was needed in order to understand the other. They resoundingly said that *The Tibetan Shrine* could stand on its own.

*It seems that Situ Panchen's main focus in his artwork is religion and the different aspects of it. He paints minor deities. There is also a lot of stuff about the Tantric deities. I think it fits altogether because *The Shrine* is where all of the different things come together as one. The paint[ings] are about different aspects of it. I think it ties well.*

## Questions and further inquiry

The dual exhibitions generally provoked interviewees to want to look further into the subject matter, especially Buddhism and Situ Panchen; however, they did not always find the necessary tools in the exhibition itself to answer their questions or guide their further inquiry.

*In the Realm of the Buddha* presented information that was often foreign to the visitors, so it charged them to find out more about the subject. Some people cited that they had a cursory interest in Buddhism, practicing Yoga or traveling East, and that this allowed them a different outlet to expand their limited knowledge. Unfortunately, when asked how they would get more information, many interviewees did not mention looking to resources within the exhibition. One visitor “didn't see any reference to materials except... under one or two of the images.” Additionally, visitors didn't know what the HAR numbers were [in Situ Panchen] or what to do with them.

*The only place that I thought there was information available was in the books laying around. It wasn't as if there was someone standing around to answer questions.*

\* \* \*

*It would have been helpful if there was a docent hanging around the room to answer questions. I know that in the Rubin there's someone standing there to answer questions.*

However, some visitors were quite satisfied that there would be enough resources to answer any questions they had or to deepen their knowledge. Visitors mentioned looking at labels, books lying around, and the catalogue as various sources that could be utilized:

*If I really wanted to know something I could have looked at the signs. I'm not sure if they had everything. There were lots of signs, so I'm sure I could have found information there.*

## Response to architectural element

Interviewees responded positively to the red gate; however, the piece was not as important to them as the rest of the exhibition. It was not brought up in conversation spontaneously or spoken about at length. That is not to say that the architectural piece was a negative for visitors – it was definitely viewed as an impressive piece and an aesthetic way to connect the two exhibits.

*The last time we came to the museum, I saw the red gate when I was upstairs as you were setting it up. It made me think I definitely have to come back to see what's going on. It was a very good welcome.*

### **Other outcomes of the paired exhibitions**

One docent whom the study team spoke with said some visitors were sensitive to the political tension with China and that they had gotten a broader depth of understanding and appreciation of Tibetan cultural legacy. The study team interviewed one couple in their seventies who were very knowledgeable about Tibetan Buddhism, culture and art, and who echoed that reaction:

*Since we have this affection for Tibet, we are quite disturbed by the Chinese occupation of Tibet. I noticed in here the reference to the Manchu dynasty in China. I thought, "Uh-huh..., well the Chinese shrugged off the Manchus. Then the Tibetans in time will shrug off the hands [and] have their own culture again." It's a wonderful culture. Of course it's got lots of Chinese elements and it's got lots of Indian elements, but throughout it there's the 'Tibetanness' of it... So, someday Tibetans will be able to work out their own history and new direction. I hope so. Meanwhile, this has just been a lovely refresher for us. How much we've enjoyed it.*

### **Discussion**

The 37 interviewees in this qualitative study responded positively to *In the Realm of the Buddha* (*The Tibetan Shrine* and *Situ Panchen*) due to its unique and memorable nature. The exhibition, like all FSG exhibitions, had the goal of meeting the Museum's three guiding principals for visitors: to develop emotional experiences that touch our being and create memories; to pose provocative questions that incited visitors to investigate; and to provide tools that engage visitors to find out more. *In the Realm of the Buddha* met two of the three guiding principles.

**Emotional experiences:** Some visitors who did not come to the Museum specifically to see this exhibition were happily surprised that it was there. Deemed by most interviewees to be beautiful and calming, *The Tibetan Shrine* allowed visitors to have a unique experience that was both memorable and emotional. It transported Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike into a peaceful place, enhanced by the dim lighting and chanting in the background. Visitors reacted to the beauty and cultural significance of *The Shrine*. One visitor who had never been in a shrine before described it: "You could almost feel a very deep, compassionate presence. It was very refreshing."

***Sacredness of The Shrine:*** The atmosphere in *The Shrine* enabled visitors to experience it as a sacred space, and the design elements helped give visitors a more authentic experience. It allowed visitors to remove themselves from the Museum and “slow down.” The sacredness of *The Shrine* did not present any issues for visitors – the museum setting and lack of religious emphasis in the signage kept it from being forceful. Even if they themselves did not feel *The Shrine* to be sacred, visitors would not have a problem with others deeming it so, nor would they have a problem with worship or meditation going on inside *The Shrine*. Interviewees said that *The Shrine* shouldn’t be controversial “because it’s more about the art.”

***Provocative questions:*** Both *The Shrine* and *Situ Panchen* met FSG’s second guiding principle by displaying the topics of Tibetan Buddhism and Situ Panchen in a way that intrigued visitors and inspired them to want to look further into the subject matter. Both interviewees who had no background with the subject matter and those who did were moved enough by their experience in the exhibition to want to look further into this field.

Interviewees said that they would like to find out more about the cultural and religious aspects of Buddhism; in particular *The Shrine* allowed visitors to dip into an aspect of Buddhism that they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to see, so it was this window that sparked further interest. *Situ Panchen* helped visitors see an artistic side of Buddhism that was mostly unknown to them and created a sense of curiosity about the man as well as his painting style.

The pairing of the two shows – seen as complementing each other while at the same time recognized as being very different – served to raise the experience level and generate more questions for visitors.

***Provide tools that engage visitors to find out more:*** *In the Realm of the Buddha* failed to meet the Museum’s third guiding principle because visitors largely did not feel that there were sufficient sources inside of the Museum to answer their questions or guide further inquiry. Visitors occasionally mentioned books and other resources lying around the exhibit space, but few interviewees had actually looked at these sources. Study team interviewers were asked whether there was a catalogue and (from visitors that had seen Situ Panchen in the Rubin) where the HAR numbers were.

As noted above, interviewees thirsted for more information with respect to *The Shrine* (but not placed inside *The Shrine*). In *Situ Panchen* visitors were left with unanswered questions on a subject that most visitors were not wholly familiar with.

They wanted more information about the scenes that were being depicted and less scholarly information about the encampment style and Situ Panchen.





## Analysis of Visitor Comment Book Entries

Many visitors treated the notebooks in the common area between *The Tibetan Shrine* and *Situ Panchen* as guest books, leaving brief messages of appreciation such as, "I love Asian culture. Thanks for the beauty!" and signing their name. Some comments were graffiti-like in nature and for the most part unrelated to the exhibits. Others were more thoughtful, noting specific aspects of the exhibits they appreciated or felt needed improvement. There were 185 of these thoughtful comments that OP&A sorted out to be further analyzed through categorization by the subject theme of the comment.

It is important to note that because comments were given completely voluntarily, in most cases it is unclear whether the visitor was referring to the *Situ Panchen* exhibit or to *The Shrine*, so comparisons between the two cannot be made, and the same kinds of responses cannot necessarily be expected from a single exhibit on its own.

Usually only visitors with strong feelings, either positive or negative, tend to write in comment books, so it is quite possible that there were a large number of visitors with fairly neutral reactions to the exhibit who are not represented well in this analysis. Additionally, because visitors only wrote about the aspects of the exhibit which interested them, this report does not address every one of the Museum's concerns that are described above. However, because comment book analysis is a qualitative study, it can be a powerful tool for discovering unexpected responses and acquiring a sense of how different individuals responded to the exhibit in sometimes deeply personal ways. The topics that visitors did bring up and that, consequently, this report discusses are:

- how visitors connected *In the Realm of the Buddha* to showcasing Tibetan Buddhist culture,
- how visitors understood their visits to *The Shrine* to be cultural experiences,
- how visitors viewed the exhibition as a tool to help them learn about both Tibetan Buddhist culture and about the Buddhist religion,
- how visitors found *In the Realm of the Buddha* to have a unique atmosphere that was, to some visitors, spiritual in nature, and to others, peaceful in a way that encouraged deep contemplation and reflection.

## ***Findings: Comment Subject Themes***

### **Culture**

Culture was one of the most common subject themes to emerge from the comments, and many aspects of it were focused on by different visitors.

***Discovering a “hidden” culture:*** Several people noted the “hidden-ness” of Tibetan culture. For example, one said, “Amazing, beautiful, and a look at a world not usually seen,” and another wrote, “Thank you so much for presenting and showing this art from a part of the world that has often been tossed and forgotten.” Others were appreciative of how *In the Realm of the Buddha* was able to share this often hidden culture with others or helped them learn about it. These visitors wrote things like, “Very different culture compared to American and European artwork. Glad it is here to show this difference and expand knowledge to others. Thank you;” and “So much beauty and tradition – so rich. Thanks for the clear explanations. They opened a door into an unfamiliar world.” A similar sentiment, though focused more on history than on culture, is expressed in this comment: “Wow! Such history. I wish it were part of our American education because the world is getting smaller, and we need to know the history of other people!” And in fact, another family did use the exhibit to teach their children this history. One mother described, “What an amazing collection. My husband used it to teach my daughters some of Tibet’s history. Thank you very much.” There were many comments focused on how the exhibit was able to work towards the similar goal of helping people, including the comment writers themselves, learn about Tibetan culture. Some of these include:

*A beautiful, inspiring exhibition. It touches the soul and the senses. The ImaginAsia program is a wonderful way to introduce young people (and adults) to Buddhist/Asian art and culture.*

*I was so pleased to see an exhibition on Tibetan Buddhism. It was so beautiful and peaceful. What I especially appreciated was the raising of awareness of Tibetan culture, beauty, and art through this exquisite collection.*

*I was thrilled to hear about this exhibit. I spent a couple months in Dharmshala, India learning about Tibetan culture and all their artwork, and how they express their spirituality is magnificent. I’m glad that others will get to experience a glimpse of the Buddhist beauty.*

*[It’s] great to have all those catalogues out – could you mount them on reading lamps so it would be easier to sit and read them? Thanks! This is just so stunning; it’s a great opportunity to help us understand this culture more.*

A slightly different spin on the theme of learning about culture through visiting *In the Realm of the Buddha* was taken by one visitor who wrote out in one of the comment books this reflection on the *Situ Panchen* exhibit:

*The Sackler is a must-see for me during my regular visits to Washington, DC. The Shrine and the exhibit of the art and history of Situ Panchen was a very nice surprise! He was a great scholar and artist, and I hope he inspires people who visit this exhibit to learn about their own cultures, and perhaps even to add to them.*

**Experiencing Tibetan Buddhist culture:** A good number of visitors also wrote about how they experienced Tibetan culture through visiting *The Shrine*. They explained how the exhibit brought Tibetan Buddhist culture to life, “[capturing] the feeling of Tibetan home altars/shrines that I’ve seen in Tibet,” as one visitor described. Another visitor put it more simply, saying, “In *The Tibetan Shrine*, I felt like I was in a real shrine.” A third related comment is this: “I thought [*The Shrine*] was very interesting because you got to see what it actually would have looked like.” However, there was at least one visitor, who seemed to be informed by experience, who did not believe *The Shrine* accurately depicted what real shrines look like. He said, “*The Shrine* is complete overkill and is misleading in term of the display.”

There were also several visitors who connected the experience they had in *The Shrine* or *Situ Panchen* to others they had had while visiting places with a similar culture. For example, one visitor commented, “Excellent exhibit, as usual at the Sackler. It was the best finishing touch on my recent visit to Tibet. The catalog is the best I have seen of any exhibit.” Another wrote, “*The Tibetan Shrine* brought back fond memories of visiting a Chinese Buddhist garden. It was beautiful!” Other visitors were anticipating having such experiences and shared reactions like, “I’m excited to visit this exhibit since I’m travelling to Tibet and Nepal this summer;” and “Beautiful! I can’t wait to visit Tibet!” And in fact, it was not just the thought of travelling that visitors had from visiting this exhibit. Many, as discussed above, found this exhibit to bring some of these experiences back to life, so to speak. One example is a visitor who wrote this:

*Having been to Tibet, I very much appreciated seeing all the devotional objects together in one shrine setting, as one would see them. It made me feel like I was setting foot on the roof of the world again.*

A more succinct visitor put it like this, “Thank you! It is almost like being back in Tibet.” Similarly, a different visitor said, “*The Shrine* is fantastic, a feast for the

senses. It transported me back to Lhasa thirty years ago..." Thus many visitors revived experiences they remembered through visiting this exhibit.

***Exhibition design and cultural experiences:*** Not only do the comments reveal that many visitors had cultural experiences through visiting this exhibit, both new ones and ones connected to memories, but they also reveal one reason why this was the case with *The Shrine* specifically: the holistic approach to the design of the exhibit together with the authenticity of each aspect of it. One particularly insightful comment is this:

*The altar was so remarkable with its many (250 visible!) objects so beautifully and reverently placed. Although missing the incense, the music made it seem all the more authentic. It was a very moving experience to be at the altar. Many thanks and many blessings to all who made this possible.*

Other visitors wrote in a similar vein, "A most enjoyable exhibition. The fine detail in every sculpture, painting, manuscript, and cloth, even the music in *The Shrine*, really brought Tibetan Buddhist culture to life;" and "I really like *The Tibetan Shrine*. It gives us a better idea of their culture and beliefs. Very informative and beautiful. I love the lighting – it really focuses our attention." One visitor even alluded to the lighting design's intent to replicate the light of the yak butter lamps that would be found in authentic shrines: "all that [was] missing [was] the *smell* of yak butter lamps as they burned." Two others said similar things about the music, writing, "Thank you for the chanting and sacred music in *The Tibetan Shrine* room – most enhancing;" and "Quite centered. The music in *The Shrine* was nice!!" Thus, many people appreciated the music and lighting because of how these choices added to the total cultural experience of visiting *The Shrine*.

However, there were also visitors who disliked, sometimes vehemently, various aspects of the exhibit design, though many comments did not specify whether they were referring to *The Shrine* or *Situ Panchen*. Such negative comments were especially common in regard to the lighting. Examples of these are, "Dark, hard to engage. Quite disappointing. Should have done better with presentation;" "*The Shrine* should be brighter so that we can see the stuff better;" and "I could spend all day in there! It's too bad you have to keep the lighting dim. The minuteness of the detail on many of the paintings is incredible." One particularly knowledgeable commenter wrote this:

*Nice exhibit design! As always, you guys did a great job on the look of the show! One note – the lights are dimmed, and that makes them go reddish. Shift down the \*K scale – the blues get lost, then. On the dimmed lights, try LED's instead.*

*They keep the same color temperature no matter what the lumen output is. See some of the cinema lights for reference – Kinoflo, etc. Great show, again!*

Thus, there seems to be a conflict of interests between some visitors who desired the artwork to be displayed in such a way that allowed them to see it most clearly and others who desired a display that enhanced the authenticity of the environment. One visitor articulated this tension, saying, “Excellent! I wish the items in *The Shrine* were not so clustered together and tucked away from sight, although the holistic effect is nice.”

There were also some negative reactions towards the music in *The Shrine* exhibit such as these two comments: “The music in *The Tibetan Shrine* did not really go with the atmosphere. Other than that, very interesting,” and, “It was great! But, the music in *The Shrine* did NOT go with the whole atmosphere.” Another person wrote, “It was great, I enjoyed it, but the noises made me scared. They sounded like they were in the Titanic...”

## **Buddhism**

Not surprisingly, in addition to culture, another common subject theme that comments were about was Buddhism.

***Learning about Buddhism:*** A few visitors mentioned having specific religious experiences, such as the visitor who wrote, “Michael Baker received enlightenment today! Tommie Robinson, Jr. joined him,” but the comments show that visitors primarily viewed *In the Realm of the Buddha* as a tool for them to learn about Buddhism, not participate in its practices. Again, most comments do not specify whether they refer only to *Situ Panchen*, *The Shrine*, or to both, so it is impossible to make any conclusions about *The Shrine* specifically or compare thoughts about it to those about the *Situ Panchen* exhibit. Some examples of quotes like this are, “Great exhibit. I knew something about Buddha, but this opened up so much more;” and “I have been studying mythology for two years now, but this was way more hands-on and a great look at the life of the ancient Buddha.” Other comments were much more vague or abstract. For example, several people described the exhibit by saying things like, “Lovely, and more importantly, enlightening. Thank you;” “The exhibition is wonderful and enlightening;” and “Very enlightening. Reminds us that the spirit lives on.” One visitor more clearly articulated what [s]he meant by enlightenment:

*Very well done. I myself am not very acquainted with Buddhism and Buddhist traditions, but this exhibition enlightened me and made me comprehend some*

*aspects of the culture and life style, as well as religion. The Shrine was awesome – I really felt the spirituality of the place and the feel of the religion/mentality. Thank you!*

Thus in addition to viewing *In the Realm of the Buddha* as a tool for learning about Tibetan Buddhist culture, some visitors saw it as a way for them to learn about Buddhism, as this visitor did.

**Questions about Buddhism:** However, there were many people who did not feel like they learned as much as they could have or wanted to from *In the Realm of the Buddha*, and especially about Buddhism. In fact, the most common subject of negative comments about *In the Realm of the Buddha* was that visitors wanted more information about the Buddhist subject matter of the artwork. As one woman explained, “As sacred art based in story, we long for more description of the content.” Numerous visitors expressed this same desire, and many pointed out specific images that confused them or other things they wondered about, including the finger positions the figures, the topknot, the eight fears, the mudras in *The Shrine*, the significance of the orientation of the figures in *The Shrine*, the range of moral teachings (in connection with the morality section of the exhibit), and others. A small sample of the many examples of comments on this topic is as follows:

*Although quite impressive, I feel there is a lack of explanation between Tibetan Buddhism and Indian Buddhism. In addition, I feel that although the exhibition is about Situ’s life, more insight on what his works expressed (NOT technique) would have led to a better understanding.*

*This would benefit from more explanation of the symbolism.*

*Beautiful collection. As a non-artist, I would prefer a little more balance in descriptions – less about technique, more about the spiritual character depictions in the paintings.*

*Overall peaceful energy. Lovely textures and colors. It would be more instructive if you provided explanations of some of the images depicted such as consorts in wrapped embraces of Buddha. This was supposed to inspire monastics for their life of singleness?*

*Situ Panchen is a brilliant exhibit. I shall be back for more. It would have been nice to include a glossary of terms [related to Tibetan Buddhism] on a handout.*

*These are fantastic objects. But I do wonder what audience the curator had in mind for this exhibit. The interpretive info, apart from *The Shrine Catalogue*, discusses each work almost solely from the perspective of their manufacturer. There is little attempt to explain or interpret the cultural/spiritual significance*

*of that depicted. I understand you cannot always cover both the “how/when” and the “what” aspect of the objects exhibited, but the vast majority of people viewing this exhibit need some amount of guidance on both. So this seemed a bit lop-sided, leaving me with [the thought of], ‘Oh, what a wonderful yet strange people,” and not really connecting.*

The desire for more information about the Buddhist subject matter of the artwork was thus a very common one among visitors.

## **Atmosphere**

A third common subject theme of the comments was the atmosphere of the exhibit. The most common description of the exhibit in terms of atmosphere was that it was peaceful and calm or a place conducive to contemplation and reflection. A few visitors said things like, “[it reminded] my friend of a scary basement.” More common, though, were comments which described the atmosphere as spiritual.

***Spiritual atmosphere:*** Several visitors, in describing the exhibit or their experience as sacred or spiritual, wrote descriptions like, “A beautiful and sacred exhibit;” “Very spiritual, great experience;” “The most prayerful and spiritual museum of all! Thanks;” “*The Tibetan Shrine* is well set! Nice job arranging everything. It’s mind-blowing to find such a spiritual place in the heart of D.C.!” and “Great collection. Thank you for bringing the collection to Washington. Excellent combination of art and spiritual awakening.” One person used specifically religious terminology to describe the exhibit, saying, “Inspiring and awesome display. I’m deeply moved and touched by this sanctuary!” Perhaps this is similar to what one visitor meant when he said, “It was lovely, but I couldn’t help thinking I was in a Catholic church.” A number of visitors also described how they felt in the exhibit as spiritual, writing things like, “I loved the different spiritual and relaxed feeling I got in the Buddha room;” “I really felt the spirit of Buddhism and the importance of tradition;” and “It was a very spiritual and heavenly feeling at this place.”

***Peaceful atmosphere:*** However, even more visitors described the atmosphere of *In the Realm of the Buddha* as peaceful than as spiritual. Many of these comments were quite succinct and read something like this: “Wow! Peaceful, calm, beautiful!” and, “A place of peace. Thank you!” A sample of some of the more unique comments on this topic include these: “Very peaceful. [It] allows one to breathe and relax – the spirit transcends;” “It is absolutely amazing with this energy of peace;” “Great exhibit! Thank you for putting it up. It has a very calming effect on the mind;” and “After living with a body of stress and anxiety for a long time, I suddenly realized I find peace here. *The Tibetan Shrine* was exquisite, calming, and hopeful.” The list of

examples could continue on and on, for the peaceful atmosphere of the exhibit, with thirty-five comments about it, was by far the most common subject sub-theme to appear in the comment books.

***Contemplation and reflection:*** Another aspect of the peaceful atmosphere is that it provided a place for contemplation and reflection. One thoughtful visitor described it like this:

*I'm currently studying Buddhism in my Asian Religions class at Gallaudet University. I love this exhibit because it provided a peaceful environment where I was able to freely think about how life works and how we relate to the universe.*

A similar comment read, "Inspiring. The exhibition provides a vehicle for man's soul to pursue a path to inner peace." The visitors who wrote these two comments described how they contemplated deep issues while visiting this exhibit, but others wrote about other kinds of reflections they had while visiting the exhibit. For instance, one visitor wrote, "These are empowered objects. They are extremely joyful and welcoming and challenging. I feel lucky to have been able to spend time with them;" and another, "This gallery is a great collection of very moving, pointed artwork. It is not only art; it is an adventure into the soul." Still more visitors shared these reflections: "It moves to deeper thoughts and better actions;" and "I am awestruck - peaceful beauty from an era with so little peace." As these comments show, visitors' reflections covered a wide range of subjects, corresponding with the individuality of each visitor.

Along these same lines, several visitors shared their religious reflections on this exhibit. One person wrote, "Whether one is Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, etc., we all look up to a holy one. This exhibit is just one of many unifying exhibits that connect all religions as one. Inspirational! Thank you." This idea of the unity of all religions was not shared by all visitors who reflected on religion, though. Many Christians responded to the exhibit by sharing their main beliefs, writing statements in the comment books like, "These people need Jesus;" and "Though it is beautiful, Jesus is the only way;" One similar comment was supported by other visitors who, with arrows pointing to the original, added their own comments of, "Yes!" and "So true!" However, though it is somewhat surprising given the religious subject matter of the artwork, this was the extent of all the reflective comments about religion.

A few comments were related to the present-day political situation in Tibet. Some visitors wrote slogans such as, "Save Tibet!" and one visitor shared the Chinese perspective of, "Tibet is a part of China!" A few visitors reflected thoughtfully on the



issue, writing things like, “Free Tibet... Don’t forsake the people for their art!” and “The beauty, culture, and traditions of Tibet are fast disappearing. Must we be content to pursue this only within the walls of a museum?” A different kind of reflection on the topic is found in one particularly interesting comment, a freestyle poem that one visitor wrote:

*Now we all know the controversy 'bout that "Free Tibet."  
But in the time of Situ Panchen this ain't happened yet.  
He was just a monk tryin' 'a get some love and respect,  
So why you talkin' 'bout politics an' gettin' all upset?  
So here's a word of advice: you should check out The Shrine,  
Parlay with Sokyomuni Buddha, get your heart in line.  
Check out the tantric bodhisattvas, they will blow your mind.  
And the exhibition only takes ten minutes of yo' time!*

Again, the above comments reveal how personally many visitors reacted to *In the Realm of the Buddha*, both in terms of the content and style of their reflections.

A final critical comment related to the peaceful, contemplative atmosphere of the exhibit is this:

*Please tell the museum guards to BE QUIET near this exhibit. It should be a place of mindfulness and contemplation, NOT a place where the guards congregate to laugh, yell, and use poor English grammar within earshot of all patrons. (Aren't they PAID to PATROL this museum?)*

Though this visitor does seem to be reacting rather harshly, his comment emphasizes, again, the importance that the experience of visiting *In the Realm of the Buddha* had to visitors, whether it was a cultural, learning, spiritual, or peacefully reflective one.

## ***Discussion***

That culture was one of the most common subject themes to appear in the comment books reveals that many visitors connected *In the Realm of the Buddha* to Tibetan Buddhist culture in some way or another. One of these ways is that many viewed the exhibit as a way to present Tibetan Buddhist culture to people who may not have known much about it before and help them learn about. *The Shrine*, specifically, was viewed by some as a means for experiential learning because, as many described, this exhibit was seen as more than a display of artwork; it was a cultural experience. Nearly all visitors reacted positively to this educational aspect of the exhibit.

However, there were a few who were concerned about the accuracy of the representation of the size of home altars.

Visitors' reactions to various aspects of the exhibit's design, and, specifically, the music and lighting in *The Shrine*, seem to be related to whether or not they viewed their visit to be a cultural experience. For, most of the positive reactions to the music, lighting, and arrangement relate to how these choices make viewing *The Shrine* more authentic or help the exhibit bring Tibetan culture to life. On the other hand, most of the negative about the lighting have to do with visitors desiring better visibility. Multiple people, too, said the music did not go with the atmosphere. This is particularly striking since the music played was actual Tibetan Buddhist music and because it contradicts what many visitors said about the music adding to the authenticity of the cultural experience of visiting *The Shrine*. However, some of the comments reveal that visitors thought the music was strange because they associated it with other very different settings. They did not know that the music was actual Tibetan Buddhist music, and therefore they could not understand it as enhancing the cultural experience of the exhibit.

As far as Buddhism is concerned, many visitors, again, viewed *In the Realm of the Buddha* as an educational tool, as the numerous questions about the Buddhist subject matter of the artwork demonstrate. However, these questions also show that many visitors did not think the exhibition reached the educational potential it could have. They desired more information about Buddhism to be given to them through the labels in the *Situ Panchen* exhibit, a chart depicting the arrangement of the works in *The Shrine*, a glossary of Buddhist terms, and other means. Several people did appreciate the thoroughness of the catalogue, though, but desired that this type of holistic discussion be extended to the *Situ Panchen* exhibit, which discussed the artwork primarily as artwork alone and rarely explained the religious significance. There were some visitors who described having a spiritual experience, but for the most part, these were just that; only a few people said they had a specifically religious experience like enlightenment.

Many visitors noted the unique atmosphere of *In the Realm of the Buddha* and, again, most visitors described it as a spiritual rather than a religious one. Even more common were those who thought the atmosphere was peaceful and encouraging of contemplation in a way not necessarily connected to either religion or spirituality. There were some visitors who did reflect on religion, but no one said the exhibit was an inappropriate use of it in a public institution. This is not to say that at least some visitors did recognize the exhibit as a religious statement – some Christians did feel

the need to respond to the exhibit by sharing one of their basic beliefs, even while still appreciating the beauty of the artwork.

Thus, though it is somewhat surprising given the title of the exhibition and religious subject matter of the artwork, most visitors did not relate *In the Realm of the Buddha* to religion. Rather, they connected it more to either culture or spirituality, and when they did connect it to Buddhism, they saw the exhibit as an educational tool not a promotional one.



# Appendix A: Questionnaire

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## Arthur M. Sackler Gallery *In the Realm of the Buddha*

Is this your first visit to this museum, the Freer and Sackler Galleries?

Yes  No

Did you come specifically to see *In the Realm of the Buddha*?  
(*The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection and/or  
Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen?*)

Yes  No

Please rate your experience in *The Tibetan Shrine* exhibition today:

Poor  Fair  Good  Excellent  Superior

Which best describes the amount of information in *The Tibetan Shrine*?

Too little  Just right  Too much

Please rate your experience in the *Situ Panchen* exhibition today:

Poor  Fair  Good  Excellent  Superior

When did you first become aware that the *Situ Panchen* exhibition is on loan from another museum (Rubin Museum)?

When I saw this question  During my visit  Before my visit

If you had to eliminate one of the two exhibitions, which would you cut?

*The Tibetan Shrine*  *Situ Panchen*

How interested are you in Buddhism?

Not interested at all  Somewhat interested  Very interested

How interested are you in Tibetan/Himalayan art?

Not interested at all  Somewhat interested  Very interested

Are you male or female?  Male  Female

What is your age?

Are you visiting these exhibitions alone or with others?

I am alone  I am with others

Do you live in the United States or another country?

United States, Zip Code:

Another country, specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank You!**

Ses   Seg  1  2  3 Stat  C  R  L  I  U/N ID



## Appendix B: Frequencies of Responses

1. Is this your first visit to this museum, the Freer and Sackler Galleries?  
57% Yes 43% No
2. Did you come specifically to see In the Realm of the Buddha? (*The Tibetan Shrine from the Alice S. Kandell Collection and/or Lama, Patron, Artist: The Great Situ Panchen?*)  
37% Yes 63% No
3. Please rate your experience in *The Tibetan Shrine* exhibition today:  
1% Poor 3% Fair 25% Good 45% Excellent 27% Superior
4. Which best describes the amount of information in *The Tibetan Shrine*?  
18% Too little 78% Just right 4% Too much
5. Please rate your experience in the *Situ Panchen* exhibition today:  
0% Poor 4% Fair 36% Good 45% Excellent 15% Superior
6. When did you first become aware that the Situ Panchen exhibition is on loan from another museum (Rubin Museum)?  
32% When I saw this question 55% During my visit 13% Before my visit
7. If you had to eliminate one of the two exhibitions, which one would you cut?  
*Among visitors who marked one of the answers provided:*  
30% *The Tibetan Shrine* 70% *Situ Panchen*  
*Among visitors who marked one of the answers provided or indicated neither:*  
24% *The Tibetan Shrine* 56% *Situ Panchen* 20% Neither
8. How interested are you in Buddhism?  
16% Not interested at all 51% Somewhat interested 34% Very interested
9. How interested are you in Tibetan/Himalayan art?  
9% Not interested at all 58% Somewhat interested 34% Very interested
10. Are you male or female?  
44% Male 56% Female
11. What is your age?  
Mean: 43 Median: 45

12. Are you visiting these exhibitions alone or with others?

22% I am alone 78% I am with others

13. Do you live in the United States or another country?

93% United States 7% Another country



## Appendix C: Interview Guide

### In the Realm of the Buddha Qualitative Questions

#### Introductory questions

- Where are you from?
- Is this your first visit to this museum? This exhibition?
- How did you find out about these shows?
- Why did you come here today? (*motivation/interest*)
- Are you familiar with Buddhism? With Tibetan/Himalayan art?
- Did you see both *The Shrine* and the *Situ Panchen* exhibits? Which order did you see them in?

#### **Shrine** | Tell me about your experience in *The Shrine* exhibition.

*Probe about:*

- Reaction—what did you think about *The Shrine*? Were you surprised by the altar?
- Response—how did you feel in *The Shrine*? Did you have a strong emotional/memorable experience?
- Sacred space—did you feel this was a sacred space? If so, did you have any issue with that?
- Information—was there enough information about the objects for you? Did you have questions about the objects that you could not find the answer to?
  - Did you read the introductory label? Did it help you understand the exhibition? Was the label too simplified/just right/too academic?
  - Did you look at the concordance or catalog? Did you know that the catalog was there for information on individual objects?
- Questions and further inquiry—did the exhibition pose provocative questions? Did it give you the tools that direct you for further inquiry?
- Improvements—what could be done to make it a better experience for you?

#### **Pairing** | What was your reaction to the two shows being paired together?

*Probe about:*

- Pairing—did you see the two exhibits as different or the same? (*Do visitors see the two different approaches—the cultural perspective of *The Shrine* and the focus on the art of *Situ Panchen*?*)
- Preference—which one did you like better?

- Add—was there anything in the *Situ Panchen* exhibit that added to your understanding of *The Shrine*? Anything in *The Shrine* that added to your understanding of *Situ Panchen*?
- Subtract—imagine that *The Shrine* stood by itself without the *Situ Panchen* exhibit. Would it work as well? Why or why not?
- Title—what expectations did the title set up for you? Did the exhibition meet those expectations? (*Does the umbrella title work for the two shows?*)

**Situ Panchen | Tell me about your experience in the *Situ Panchen* exhibition.**

*Probe about:*

- Reaction—what did you think about the exhibition?
- Response—did you have a strong emotional/memorable experience?
- Understanding—what did you feel the main idea of the exhibition was? (*Do visitors understand that the show is about the artist, not a religious movement or a theme?*)
- Labels—did you read the labels? Did they help you understand the exhibition? Were the labels too simplified/just right/too academic?
- Questions and further inquiry—did the exhibition pose provocative questions? Did it give you the tools that direct you for further inquiry? (*Did they notice/plan to follow-up on the HAR numbers?*)
- Asia in America program—were you aware that the labels, etc., of the *Situ Panchen* exhibit came from the lender, the Rubin Museum in New York? Does this matter to you? (*Significance*)

**Observations about the population interviewed**

- Age
- Gender
- Group composition