Article Side

Know More About Buddhist Artwork by Catherine

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In the earliest centuries of Buddhism, statues of the Buddha were not used. Instead, Buddhist art consisted of images symbolizing the Buddha and his teachings, such as the lotus, the Wheel of the Law, the Bodhi tree and the Buddha's footprints. Eventually, the Buddha image became one of the most popular representations in Buddhism, but these early symbols remain important and are frequently used to this day. They are especially important in Theravada Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and Thailand.

Given the association of Buddhism with the meditating monk, one might well assume that Buddhism emphasizes practices over beliefs. It is true that right practices are important in Buddhism, but the faith really centers on correct understanding of human nature and ultimate reality. The Buddha, after all, was called the "Enlightened One." After he became enlightened, he taught that the way to eliminate suffering begins with understanding the true nature of the world. However, the Buddha considered knowledge important only insofar as it remains practical. He rejected speculation about such matters as God, the nature of the universe, and the afterlife, urging his followers to focus instead on the Four Noble Truths by which they can free themselves from suffering.

As Buddhism spread, Buddhist symbolism was enriched by the cultures it came into contact with. This is especially true of Buddhism in Tibet, which has developed a rich symbolic tradition. The central symbols of Tibetan Buddhism are the Eight Auspicious Symbols, known in Sanskrit as Ashtamangala (ashta meaning eight and mangala meaning auspicious). The Eight Auspicious Symbols are printed on Tibetan prayer flags, incorporated into mandalas and thangkas, and used in other forms of ritual art. Another important symbol is the Wheel of Life, a symbolic representation of the universe as understood by Tibetan Buddhists.

Buddhist Artwork is an extension of mastery of metal. Large and round, made of beads and gold and silver, their jewelry repertoire ranges from necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and rings. In these items they carry portable holy vestments. Amulets are a common Tibetan accessory to ward off evil and to bring forth the good spirit. Pendants are also deity-inspired and adorned with turquoise, corals and pearls. Other important types of symbolism in Buddhism include colors, especially the five colors of white, yellow, red, blue and green, and symbolic hand gestures called mudras. The articles in this section explore these Buddhist symbols, providing information on their history, meaning and use in Buddhism today. (For an introduction and quick guide to Buddhist colors, see our Chart of Buddhist Color Symbolism.)

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