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Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment

Denise Patry Leidy, Robert Thurman

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"Mandala" is an ancient Sanskrit word meaning "sacred circle that protects the soul." It also refers to the sacred cosmograms that serve as core symbols of all cultures. Westerners have been fascinated for centuries about the mandalas of the Hindu-Buddhist cultures of Asia, most often painted geometric diagrams of great beauty and sophistication, that draw the viewer into a realm of balance, harmony, and calm. But such diagrams are actually architectural blueprints of the purified realm of bliss that we can only realize through enlightenment. They represent three-dimensional spaces of personal and communal exaltation, palaces for the regal confidence of love, compassion, and universal satisfaction of self and other. Understanding their role in anchoring the world-picture of a culture or a person provides a new insight into the "mandalas" of our own culture – the national space anchored by the Washington monument and its environs, or the personal cosmological space anchored by the models of the solar system, the DNA double-helix molecule, and the atom.

This exquisite book, created by the teamwork of an art historian and a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, clears away the veils of confusion and mystification, and reveals the artistic history and meditational function of the sacred mandalas that have graced the Asian civilizations for thousands of years from Mumbai to Japan. It is richly illustrated by color photographs of examples of mandalas from India, Tibet, China, and Japan from the ground-breaking exhibition presented by Tibet House U.S. in collaboration with the Asia Society and the Berkeley Museum of Fine Arts.

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