



Self-portrait of Zanabazar; colours on cotton

Zanabazar's Divine Art

Buddhist Images in Ulaan Baatar

By Abha Dayal Kaul

On my maiden journey to Mongolia this summer, I was amazed by the beautiful art in the Bogd Khan Museum and the jewel-like Zanabazar Museum of Fine Arts, all in the capital city of Ulaan Baatar. What struck me in this country was the abundance of incredible Indian and Tibetan-influenced Buddhist art.

Arriving from India along the ancient 'silk roads', Buddhism took root in Mongolia in the eighth century during Uighur times and flourished in the 17th century under the first *Bogd Gegeen* or reincarnated Buddhist leader, G Zanabazar (1635-1723). It is the art of this revered religious teacher, philosopher, statesman and 'Living Buddha' that captivated me, so I found myself in the Museum of Fine Arts (named after the legendary Zanabazar) on both 'free' afternoons while others of my group stocked up on felt and cashmere goodies or enjoyed post-trekking massages and drinks.

Art historians believe that Zanabazar, regarded as the founder of the Mongolian school of Buddhist art as well as a great religious teacher, discovered a unique casting method that eliminated the need for welding. The UNESCO-supported museum that now bears his name includes in its collection 21 of his sculptures of Goddess Tara and five Dhyani Buddhas (the Contemplative or Cosmic Buddha). For me, the most distinctive of the Buddhas was Vairochana, meaning 'Resplendent', and aptly so – this gorgeous, gilt-bronze sculpture sparkles with elaborate jewellery and delicate treatment of detail, such as a fan of pleats between the folded legs and petals that decorate the lotus pedestal.

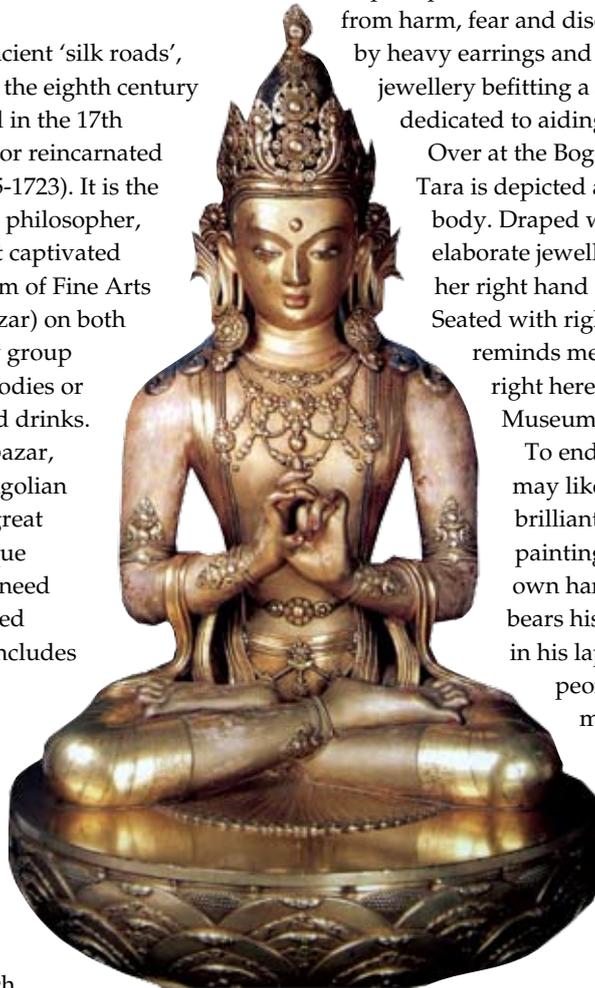
Another spectacular bronze is Sita Tara, the white goddess Tara, shown in earliest-known images from India as a celibate consort of Avalokiteshvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion. Tibetan Buddhists recognised her as the mother of all Buddhas; Mongolian Buddhists offer Tara their prayers for a long life and the hope of enlightenment.

Zanabazar's Tara is portrayed as a young virgin, suggested by the half-bloomed lotus above her left shoulder.

Her right hand is lowered in the familiar gesture of giving (*varada mudra*) and her left hand holds a white lotus, a symbol of spirituality and purity. The third eye in her forehead and those inset in her hands and feet enable her to see past, present and future, and to protect her worshippers from harm, fear and disease. Tara's earlobes are elongated by heavy earrings and she is adorned with elegant jewellery befitting a *bodhisattva*, a rare enlightened being dedicated to aiding humanity.

Over at the Bogd Khan Museum, Zanabazar's Green Tara is depicted as a mature woman with a sensual body. Draped with a fine, one-shoulder wrap and elaborate jewellery, she holds a flask of nectar in her right hand and a lotus in full bloom in her left. Seated with right leg pendant in relaxed pose, she reminds me of my own favourite Shyama Tara right here, in Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum.

To end this ode to Zanabazar, readers may like a visual image of this genius – a brilliant portrait of him in a thangka-style painting on cotton, said to be a work by his own hand, which hangs in the museum that bears his name. He sits holding a sacred text in his lap, surrounded by Chinese-inspired peonies and cups, details that owe much to the then-prevailing Manchu rule. Above him is Vajrasattva, the Supreme Being, with his consort, whose empowerment Zanabazar received at age fourteen from the Fifth Dalai Lama in Tibet. A heavenly gift for a divine artist!



Zanabazar's gilt-bronze sculpture of Vairochana

Abha Dayal Kaul moved to Singapore from India in 2000. An ex-lawyer who likes to write, she has been busy pursuing her interests in history, travel, culture and art. Abha is Co-Head for this year's Docent Training course at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Photos courtesy of the author