

SPOTLIGHT: Death of the Buddha (Nehanzu)



El Presenter: Nancy Fletcher

Date: May 19, 2009

Title of Piece: Death of the Buddha (Nehanzu)

Year created: Circa 1800

Artist: Unknown

Five most essential aspects about this work

1. This is a religious painting that would be hung in a Japanese Buddhist temple annually on the anniversary of the Buddha's death to teach lay people about an important event in the life of the Buddha. There is a long history of producing paintings and sculptures of the Buddha's parinirvana in Asia as a means to instruct the illiterate lay people. These works were produced primarily by resident monks in the temples, perhaps sponsored by wealthy laity.
2. The many beings in the painting represent bodhisattvas, gods, guardians, monks, lay people, the Buddha's mother Queen Maya, animals and devas all of whom loved him and benefitted from his teachings. Ananda, one of his chief disciples, has fainted. Ksitigarbha, the bodhisattva who help travelers, children, and beings in the hells, stands to the left of the Buddha holding a pilgrim's

staff and the wish-granting jewel. The Buddha's monk's staff and alms bowl are leaning against the tree near his head, a sign that he continued to be a wandering monk throughout his lifetime.

3. The Buddha is always shown to be lying on his right side at this death, both in sculptures as well as in paintings, because the scriptures record his death in this way. Often the size of his body is exaggerated to emphasize his importance as a great spiritual teacher. His skin is brighter than his robe to signify his passage into eternal meditation. At only one other time in his life is this shown, when he realized his enlightenment at the age of 35. He was 80 years old when he died.
4. The moon is shown in the painting because the Buddha died "in the last watch" of night, just before dawn. He had just finished giving his last teaching when he died, instructing his disciples to continue to put his teaching into practice for themselves. The sala trees are blooming out of season in honor of this momentous occasion.
5. The expression of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas is primarily calm, because they understand that he has entered into final nirvana and no longer is subject to the cycle of births and deaths.

Possible questions to use when discussing this piece with museum visitors:

1. What do you think is going on in this painting? What do you see that makes you think that?
2. Do you think this man was important? How do you know?
3. What kinds of animals do you see? Do they look like animals we see in Oregon?
4. Which is your favorite image in the painting? Why?

Tour Type: Explore Asia, Artful Animals

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