

A Collecting Odyssey

Indian, Himalayan,
and Southeast Asian Art

FROM THE JAMES AND MARILYNN
ALSDORF COLLECTION





**314 CONCH SHELL**

China or Tibet, 17th–19th
Shell with enamel and gth
metal, 20.6 × 12.1 × 8.6 cm
(8 1/8 × 4 7/8 × 3 3/16)
Inscription: see below
Plate p. 335



448d

Essential in both Hindu and Buddhist rituals, the conch shell is blown at certain moments in ceremonies to ward off evil forces. It may also be used as a container for consecrated water during a ritual. Although the inscription on the reverse of the metal flange describes this shell in the workshop of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736–95), the design and workmanship of the metal suggest Derge. In northeast Tibet, as a possible place of manufacture. The entire obverse of the metal flange is filled with scrolling vegetal motifs. Superimposed on this busy background are some suspicious symbols.



448e, f

315 COSMIC MOUNTAIN

Bhutan, 18th–19th
Rhinoceros horn with gold
plate and pigment, 25.5 × 22.3
× 9.9 cm (10 × 8 7/8 × 3 7/16)
Plate p. 338

The natural shape of a rhinoceros horn suggests a sharply peaked mountain, and carving rhinoceros horns into cosmic mountains appears to have been a popular art in the kingdom of Bhutan, which lies between Tibet and the Indian state of Assam. The Bhutanese belong to the Druk subsect of the Kagyu order of Tibetan Buddhism.

Against a background of mountain scenery—trees, streams, animals, and offerings amid stylized rocks—are niches, representing caves, containing various religious figures. The most eminent of these is shown about halfway up the mountain, beside a tiger on a lotus base within an elaborate shrine. He is an emanation of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century Indian Tantric master who went to Tibet to promote Buddhism. Directly above him is Shabdruq

Nigwang Namgyal, who arrived in the area that is now Bhutan from Tibet in 1616 and, thirty-five years later, created the state of Bhutan. Such horns carved with monks and deities within caves were probably offered as ex-votos to monasteries.

**316 SMALL DISH**

Pakistan (ancient Gandhara),
1st c. CE
Silver, diam.: 15.2 cm (5 7/16)
Published: *Coins and Monies*
145, (5), CG 70
Plate p. 340

**317 SMALL DISH**

Pakistan (ancient Gandhara),
1st c. CE
Silver, diam.: 15.1 cm (5 7/16)
Plate p. 340

The exact function of these dishes, sometimes referred to as *palettes* in trays, remains a mystery. The most popular view is that those with compartments, such as cat. 317, may have served as cosmetic dishes. Not one, however, has yielded any trace of chemicals, nor is any included in a sculptural representation of a toilet scene. It is possible that some were used to serve after-dinner spices—such as fennel, cloves, and cardamom—all whole and dry and therefore leaving no trace. The majority seem to date from about 200 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.

The motifs decorating these shallow dishes were largely drawn from the classical repertory, probably from West Asian sources, and less often from Indian sources (see cat. 307), which is one reason why their function is thought to have been secular rather than religious. In cat. 316, the band around the rim appears to be composed of lotus petals, and the relief within shows a goddess riding a sea creature called a *keter*, who looks back at her. The goddess wears an adaptation of the Greek himation and a scarf that forms a ring behind her head, signifying both the movement of the wind and a nimbus. She appears ready to feed the *keter* from the shallow bowl she holds with her right hand. Her large, staring eyes and her hair style resemble Ptolemaic style examples. At least two other dishes with the same motif are known, one from Srikap in Taala and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Hirrington et al., 1992, 196, cat. 156), and the other in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Lerner and Kosak 1901, 62–63, cat. 20).

Several characteristics make cat. 317 an unusual dish. Its face is divided into four compartments, and its back is decorated with a lozenge of very high quality and finish. Only two of the face quadrants are decorated, one with an Indian and the other with a classical motif. In the upper left segment is a winged sea monster with a *psakro* head (a elephantine trunk). (For other representations of this creature,