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Next Stop, Nirvana?

Measuring the Success, Impact, and Sustainability of a Buddhist Art Exhibition

Johannes Beltz

'Did you have a good turn out?' 'How many visitors did you get?' 'Did you get many press reviews?' These are usual questions I'm asked while any show is on view at the Museum Rietberg. However, once an exhibition ends, no deeper public attention is paid. And the mere numbers that answer such questions don't seem to generate any enduring impact on my work. I always find that surprising because every show consumes considerable human and financial resources. In this article, I argue that an exhibition shouldn't be a goal in itself but rather one of several steps towards a broader one. Here, I try to explain what makes an exhibition meaningful, sustainable, and successful.

The Museum Rietberg is a well-known institution in the field of Buddhist art (Przychowski, 2019). Its fame is largely based on its many exhibitions, some of them still remembered as being groundbreaking, such as 'The Return of the Buddha: Buddhist Sculptures of the 6th Century from Qingzhou, China' (Nickel, 2002) and 'Bhutan: Sacred Art from the Himalayas' (Przychowski, 2010).

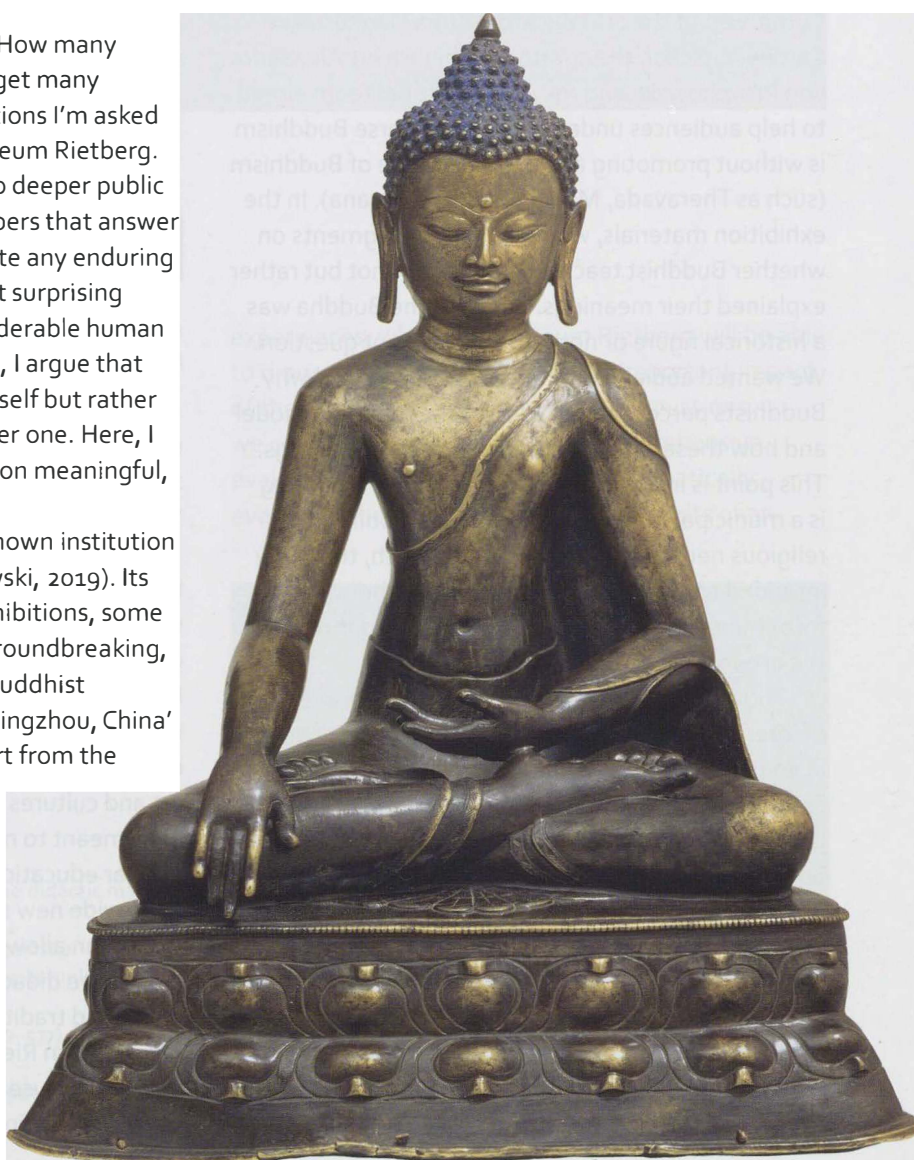


Fig. 1 Buddha Shakyamuni
Western Tibet; 12th–13th century
Copper alloy; 35 x 27 x 16 cm
Collection of Berti Aschman, on permanent
loan at Museum Rietberg, Zurich
(Inv.-Nr. BA 10)
Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

From 13 December 2018 to 31 March 2019, another major exhibition on Buddhist art was on view. The show, 'Next Stop, Nirvana: Approaches to Buddhism', attracted more than 35,000 visitors and with such a number was labelled a success. This show was considered special for several reasons: 1) It offered a general view on Buddhism across Asia, from its origins to today; 2) It presented mostly works from the Museum Rietberg collection, with the addition of a few spectacular loans; 3) It was embedded in a larger educational outreach project on teaching about world religions (which I will discuss below); 4) It was jointly curated by a four-person team, consisting of two curators of Asian art and two art educators; 5) It expanded the museum's audience base by attracting younger audiences, especially school children.

Maybe the most significant and original characteristic of the show was its curatorial approach. Composed of the art educators Anna Hagdorn and Caroline Spicker, the curator of Chinese art Alexandra von Przychowski, and me, the curatorial team aimed to help audiences understand how diverse Buddhism is without promoting any particular type of Buddhism (such as Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana). In the exhibition materials, we never made judgments on whether Buddhist teachings are true or not but rather explained their meanings. Whether the Buddha was a historical figure or not was an irrelevant question. We wanted audiences to understand how and why Buddhists perceived him as a teacher and role model and how these aspects explain Buddhist teachings. This point is important since the Museum Rietberg is a municipal institution and follows a policy of religious neutrality if not laicism. As such, the show intended to let visitors discover, think about, and form their opinions of the ideas conveyed through the artworks (Figs 1–4).

Though Asian religions had been a central area of interest for the museum, the situation changed in 2005, when the canton of Zurich created a new compulsory syllabus, which is today called 'Religions, Cultures, Ethics'. The idea was to introduce a politically neutral, non-confessional perspective, which would enable young people to understand the basic teachings and characteristics of religions practised around the world. Children and young adults should be able to understand why people eat, dress, believe, and practise according to particular faiths. Teaching about religions is the key to tolerance. Without understanding and critical

reflection on diverse beliefs, only ignorance remains (Beltz, 2006). When teachers needed to be trained and school books written under the new syllabus, the Museum Rietberg supported the undertaking (Beltz, 2013). Its curators taught teachers about Hinduism and Buddhism, and its art educators produced didactic material and offered classes, tours, and workshops. Over the years, an entire profile of art education labelled 'Understanding Religion Through Art' was generated, which supported teachers, children, and parents in this ambitious educational

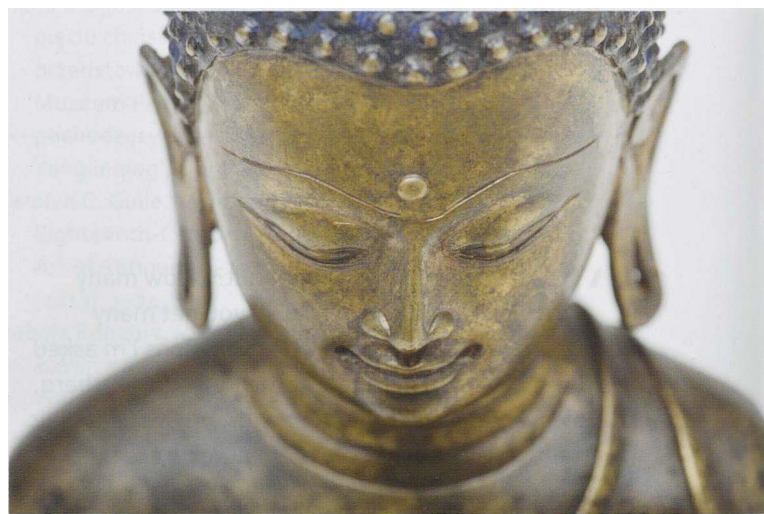


Fig. 2 Alternate view of Fig. 1
Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

endeavour (Hagdorn, 2019, 'Mein Buddha'; Hagdorn, 2019, 'Understanding Religion'; Hagdorn and Widmer, 2019).

While Hinduism had been the earlier area of focus, Buddhism became the concentration in 2018, when the Museum Rietberg entered an official collaboration with the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation. The overall aim of this partnership was to further strengthen the Museum Rietberg as a place of learning and centre of competence on Buddhist art and cultures in the education and leisure sectors. That meant to make learning about Buddhist art a regular educational programme in the museum and to provide new sustainable teaching materials. The exhibition allowed the introduction and testing of innovative didactic approaches to Buddhism, which combined traditional classroom learning with visits to the Museum Rietberg and other settings. During the show, the museum offered visits to the Thai Buddhist temple Wat Srinagarindravararamin Gretzenbach and



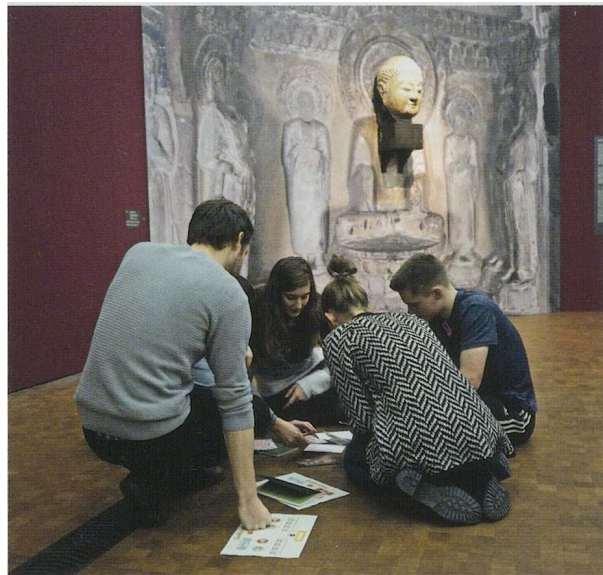
Fig. 3 Installation view of exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana'
 Exhibition design by Martin Sollberger
 Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

the Tibet Institute Rikon. Through this process, we all gained valuable insights that can be incorporated into further developing mediation offerings, after the close of the exhibition (Figs 5 and 6).

I strongly advocate that museums are not only places of entertainment but also places of learning and debate and even agents in the field of public education. In our case, we were able to build bridges between city policy makers, teachers, parents, and children. Right from the beginning, the Foundation guided us in defining sustainable impacts. Apart from testing a range of analogue and digital didactic tools, the project yielded a number of significant

experiences, which the Museum Rietberg will be able to draw on in the future. The most important impact of the project consists in the many discussions we conducted and the resulting comprehensive evaluation. For the first time we systematically evaluated the intentions, goals, and results of an

Fig. 5 Foreground: Young people exploring the didactic material in the exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana'
 Background: Head of a Buddha, displayed against a photographic reproduction of its original cave-temple location China, Hebei province, Bei Xiangtangshan; Northern Qi dynasty (550–577), 560–570 Stone
 Museum Rietberg, Gift of Eduard von der Heydt (Inv.-Nr. RCH 136)
 Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger



exhibition with all team members and the directorial board. The resulting internal discussion about the criteria to measure success is the most precious and lasting impact not only for the museum's future endeavours but also for my personal work ethic (for which I am deeply grateful). Upcoming major projects will follow the same line of thought: rethinking strategies, evaluating exhibitions, and improving workflows. The following paragraphs list the areas in which cooperation with a like-minded partner generated the most significant impacts.

Participation: Following our curatorial concept to present the diversity of Buddhist traditions, we decided to involve practising Buddhists as well as academic experts in our exhibition. We interviewed ordained monks and nuns and lay Buddhists originating from Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, and Switzerland. We filmed twelve individuals explaining how they understood notions like karma, compassion, nirvana, and rebirth. This exhibition's installation allowed active participation of Buddhist communities. We offered these participants regular time slots, called 'Personal Encounters', when they joined curators and art educators in the exhibition, to talk to visitors (Fig. 7).

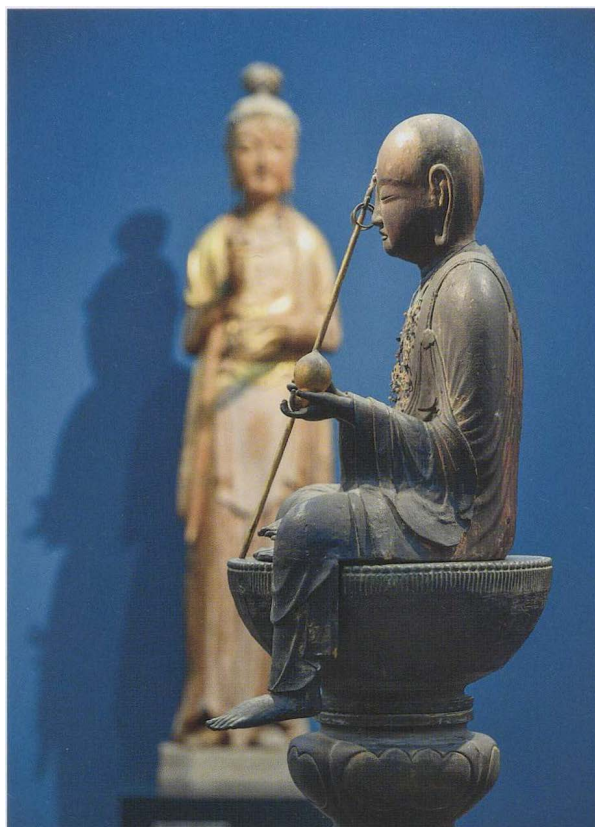


Fig. 4 Installation view of exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana'
Exhibition design by Martin Sollberger
Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

Interdepartmental collaboration: The show 'Next Stop, Nirvana: Approaches to Buddhism' triggered a dialogue among art educators and curators, which is ongoing. It was the first time that the museum's Department of Art Education was involved in all aspects of an exhibition project, from conceptualization to realization, right from the start. In the exhibition galleries, this intense collaboration between the two departments became particularly visible with regard to the interweaving of art objects and diverse learning formats, which were carefully coordinated and balanced. Most innovative was a space developed jointly by art educators and schoolchildren: In three fascinating installations, students presented their research on topics such as Buddhist iconography and gestures or Buddhism in Zurich. The success of these projects made evident that this way of collaborating needed to be continued (Fig. 8).

Fig. 6 A high-school student explains her project during the closing of a cooperative event between the Museum Rietberg and schools in Zurich
Photograph: Caroline Minjolle/Lunax

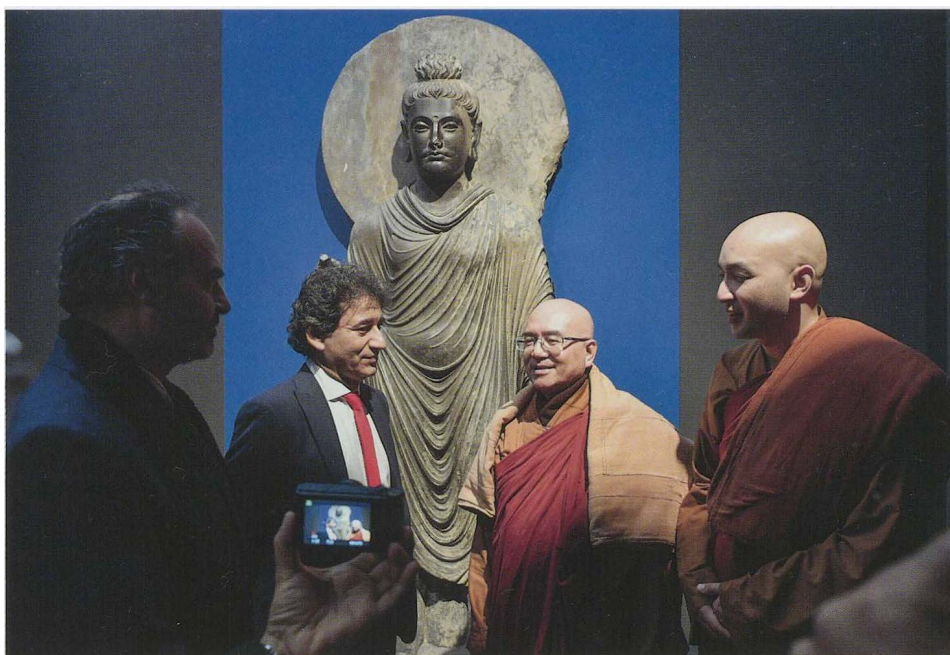


Fig. 7 Members of the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, with a group of Buddhist monks from Southeast Asia, at the opening of the exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana'
Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

Interdisciplinary collaboration: For the Museum Rietberg, the exhibition indicated a new understanding of internal interdisciplinary collaboration between not only art education and curatorship but also other departments like design and marketing. Given the necessary openness and mutual interest on the part of all participants, this could lead to a kind of creativity and authorship beyond departmental boundaries. Any exhibition could be developed by an interdisciplinary team in a joint creative process, making something that we do already into a more systematic and conscientious undertaking.

International collaboration: One of the outstanding artworks in the show was a majestic Gandharan sculpture lent from the Peshawar Museum, in Pakistan (Figs 9–10). Despite the many challenges we faced while bringing this Buddha figure to Zurich, several agreements were signed in the course of the loan process that indicate new paths for future collaborations. This cultural exchange initiated partnerships, which we strongly hope will endure and demonstrated our belief that museums can effect sustainable impacts on societies. The Museum Rietberg's second significant international collaboration was with Buddhist and religious-studies scholars from the Centre for Religious Studies (CERES), in Bochum, Germany. As a result of this collaboration, a booklet, *The ABC of Buddhism*, was published in German, French,

and English (Beltz et al., 2018). Also notable is the museum's new partnership with the National Gallery Prague (about which my colleague Markéta Hánová writes in detail, in this issue). In general, I suggest that we all think more globally and plan more projects with partners from all over the world. The reason is not only to share limited resources but also to generate synergies and to learn from others. Today, digitalization facilitates easy and rapid communication across continents. I believe that the outreach and quality of any joint exhibition would increase exponentially. It is time to imagine new partnerships. Co-curating with colleagues from all over the world, not only from Asia, should not be a unique occurrence but rather a routine practice.

Sustainable use of content and products: The internet-based application, 'Next Click, Nirvana: What is Buddhism?', developed in the context of the art-educational project 'Understanding Religion Through Art', shows well how a museum can sustainably manage resources and make use of content and products developed specifically for a themed exhibition, not only in Switzerland but also across the world. The exhibition's specially developed educational format, 'Personal Encounters', in which someone is present in the exhibition to talk to visitors, is another format to be further put into practice.

Inclusion: The exhibition had a significant impact on our understanding of what barrier-free access



Fig. 8 The organizers of the exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana': Alexandra von Przychowski, Caroline Spicker, Anna Hagdorn, and Johannes Beltz
Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

means for a museum. The Museum Rietberg received in 2019 the label Inclusive Culture, given by Pro Infirmis, a Swiss foundation promoting inclusion. The resulting discussions increased the awareness of the issues of inclusion and barrier-free access among Museum Rietberg staff. It created a framework for gaining practical insights into creating audio descriptions and multiple language versions, which

could be implemented in the development of the 'Next Click, Nirvana' app.

The Covid-19 pandemic has deeply influenced museums and their modes of functioning. As curators, directors, art educators, designers, or marketing specialists, we all had to reconsider our roles during a time when museums were closed, travelling was impossible, budgets were cut, and sponsorships were difficult to sustain. In addition to these challenges, museums in the West are increasingly asked to critically evaluate their involvement in colonial legacies of cultural suppression and theft. We all now face a changing cultural landscape that propels us to rethink challenges and opportunities. I would like to emphasize that the exhibition initiated and channelled an important reflection not only within our institution but also with outside colleagues and partners, which in turn may stimulate more positive changes to the museum world.

Museums all over the globe have to be more cooperative. They need to share more research and development of exhibitions. This kind of cooperative museum practice does not necessarily require new and complex international agreements, laws, or government policies. We all can do meaningful joint projects, wherever we are! We must, however, have strong and generous sponsors to support these new initiatives—partners like the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, for which we are very thankful.



Fig. 9 Packing the Gandharan Buddha Shakyamuni for transport, Peshawar Museum, Pakistan (Inv.-Nr. PM 2857)
Photograph: Johannes Beltz



Fig. 10 Buddha Shakyamuni; installation view of exhibition, 'Next Stop, Nirvana'
 Gandhara, Sahri Bahlol; 2nd–3rd century
 Grey schist; 289 x 117 x 68 cm
 Peshawar Museum (Inv.-Nr. PM 2857)
 Photograph: Rainer Wolfsberger

This article is an output of the many long debates and discussions with colleagues at the Museum Rietberg; I want to thank here in particular Anna Hagdorn, Alexandra von Przychowski, Caroline Spicker, Karolina Lisowski, and Caroline Widmer, who are the individuals when I used the 'we' in this review. Above all, I want to express my thanks to Anita Chung from The Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, who stimulated these far-reaching reflections. The Swiss Embassy and Swiss Development Agency in Islamabad need to be thanked for their generous support in bringing the Buddha from Peshawar to Zurich. Without all these helping hands and many, many others, who cannot be listed here, this entire project would not have been possible.

Further information on the collections, exhibitions and educational activities is available at www.rietberg.ch/en; the Buddhist e-learning app 'Next Click Nirwana' is accessible at www.klicknirvana.rietberg.ch/en.

Johannes Beltz is Deputy Director, Head of Collections and Art Education, and Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Museum Rietberg.

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