

# A MERGER OF CULTURES

## BUDDHIST ART OF THE YUAN AND MING ERAS

### INTRODUCTION

The extent of the merging of disparate cultures that occurred during the Yuan period (1271-1368) in China has never been repeated perhaps anywhere on earth before or since this time. From what is modern day Hungary to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, people who had been separated became connected and part of a larger, complex empire under Mongol rule that ultimately shaped great parts of the world we live in today.

Khubilai Khan (1215-1292 AD) was the fifth Great Khan and the grandson of Genghis Khan. It was he who ascended the Imperial Chinese throne and in 1271 founded the dynasty he called “Yuan”, or “Primal Force”. His mother, Sorghaghtani Beki (1198-1252 AD), a daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan married to his son Tolui, was an immensely talented administrator whose vision helped what would become the Yuan Empire. She was from the Keraite clan and a 10<sup>th</sup> generation Nestorian Christian.

It can come as no surprise that under the circumstances of such dramatic fusion, evolving over three generations starting with Genghis Khan, that traditional material culture could and would be transformed in all parts of the empire, especially at its center, and that its influence would last well beyond the Yuan period. The arts enjoyed a phase of great innovation, creativity and experimentation;

the changes were so fundamental that the objects created in this period became the new standard or prototype for the subsequent periods.

This exhibition focuses on Buddhist sculpture and devotional objects that were created and used during the Yuan and early Ming Dynasties. After Khubilai Khan became Emperor he maintained his patronage of the Tibetan Sakya school and adopted Vajrayana Buddhism as the state religion in China. The early 15<sup>th</sup> century saw a strong revival of imperial patronage and the first three Ming Emperors, especially Zhu Di (reigned 1403-1424), had a genuine personal interest in Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism.

As I have documented in my earlier exhibition “Before Yongle” in 2015, an identifiable Imperial style emerged during the Yuan. Clearly demonstrating a vision with a new visual language, broadly speaking, this style flourished not only under Mongol patronage in China, but was used also in Tibet and to a lesser degree, in the Kathmandu Valley, allowing us to call it an “international style”.

It is the goal of this presentation to shed new light on the art historical development of Tibeto-Chinese art during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and to foster further scientific discussions in this still understudied field.