



## Symbols and Cymbals - A Visit to a Sacred Citadel

By Carol McKenna Fort

### Blessings and Gifts

Listen carefully. You will hear pleasant sounds that attract, enthrall, transport and teach accompanied by enthralling myths, historic legends and Tibetan beliefs. Dr. Premendra Verma escorted us on a journey into the land of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama and the world of Tibetan arts and crafts during our visit to his gallery and showroom in September.

Dr. Prem was born in Dharamshala, where the Dalai Lama resides. He grew up with a spiritual awareness so when he was introduced to the Dalai Lama as a small child, it seemed a natural part of his upbringing. Dr. Prem explained, "It is traditional to bring a scarf to the Dalai Lama which the holy man blesses and returns to the giver." And so we come to the Eastern belief - a gift received is a blessing returned. A photograph in the shop depicting this event holds a place of honor near the entrance. Look carefully or you might miss it.

Dr. Premendra holds a PhD in US Diplomatic History. He spent five years in the US as a visiting professor, first at the Harry S. Truman Library in Independence, Mo.; then at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.; then at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.; followed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IL. His American journey of discovery was concluded at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C. Dr. Prem is married to a Malaysian lady and they have

a three-year-old son. His interest in sustaining the traditional crafts of Tibet, supporting local craftsman, and sharing the wisdom of Eastern ideas and philosophies led him to establish Sacred Citadel in Bangsar.

Passing under a door frame, we noticed colorful banners in yellow, green, red, white and blue, depicting each of the five elements of the universe; fire, water, earth, metal wood. On either side of the door hang vertical banners of silk brocade, embroidered with the eight Buddhist symbols.

### Bowls, Bells, and Wheels:

A display of beautifully etched bronze bowls resting quietly on silk cushions occupies the center of the shop. The etched designs show Buddhist symbols in faint relief. These bowls can be used for cleansing the aura and as an aid to meditation. They are made of seven metals to enable them to achieve a brilliant resonance.

We all tried to make the bowls sing. The bowl is held in the outstretched palm of one hand while the other hand strokes the rim with a leather wrapped wooden wand in a clockwise circular motion. Each bowl resonates with a different bell-like tone. The sound expands in waves to fill the room with vibratory warmth that lingers long after the singing bowl is quiet.

Also in bronze is the bell and scepter, which represent the female and male principles.

"Wisdom" is associated with the female and "compassion" is associated with the male. Both are necessary to achieve enlightenment. They are sold together as a complementary set. When struck, the bell brings the listener immediately into the present moment - past and future fall away. Finger cymbals capture our attention in much the same manner.

Prayer wheels are aligned respectfully along a shelf near the entrance. No two are exactly alike. Each wheel is a cylinder mounted on a wooden handle that can be made to spin. As with the singing bowls, clockwise is the correct direction to spin the prayer wheel so that it is in harmony with the universe. A Tibetan prayer is written on a paper roll inside each wheel. By meditating with the prayer wheel, a devotee can feel change and feel more in alignment with his spiritual self. There are also globe-shaped prayer wheels.

Bronze figures of Buddha sitting or standing in various mudras quietly survey the room. These mudras or hand positions indicate meditation, teaching, blessings or healing. The reverse of each figure shows embossed scenes from the life of Buddha.

### Wall Hangings and Paintings

Buddhist figures are also found on the silk wall hangings. Dr. Prem explained that the painter paints the eyes of the Buddha figure last, "to pay appropriate respect, one should never gaze directly into the eyes of Buddha." While many of the paintings



depict a Buddha in repose or meditation, some show an erotic coupling. Symbolically, this suggests rebirth and continuation.

Tibetan spiritual paintings are full of symbols and images. In ancient times, literacy was rare, but even ordinary people who could not read could understand symbols and come to know the teachings of the scriptures. The wild boar for example, represents ignorance, while the rooster signifies desire, and the serpent, anger. Paintings can be made according to the buyer's requirements for subject, colors, and other details. It can take as long as eight months to create a painting and requires that the artist have a broad knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures.

A silk mounted mandala, or map of the Buddhist universe hangs on one of the walls. It resembles a maze with a lotus in the center and represents the process of purification: To achieve a divine state, one must purify oneself along the journey of life.

## Furniture and Carpets - Practical and Beautiful

Moving from the sacred figures to the furnishings, Dr. Prem showed examples of painted and lacquered cupboards crafted in the traditional way with no hinges. Doors are notched to pivot open. Glass panels slide and may be removed for easy shipment and transport which would certainly have been important to the nomadic people who designed them and are practical for today's expat nomads. Multicolored lacquered decorations depict dragons, phoenixes, and tigers that are also the motifs found in

the silk and brocaded cushion covers.

If you're not already walking in the clouds, you can walk on the splendidly bold hand woven carpets with cloud motifs. Other motifs are the classic Tibetan tiger or the eagle. These vibrant carpets are made from Merino wool yarn imported from New Zealand. They, too, can be custom ordered with the preferred number of knots (48, 60, 80 and 100). Delivery takes a minimum of five months depending upon the complexity of the design and the number of knots.

While Chinese decorative motifs are abundant in the Tibetan iconography, the influence of India on the art of Tibet is also evident. Ganesh, known in India as the remover of obstacles, appears in the form of a human with an elephant head. Figures of Ganesh are crafted in fish bone as well as bronze and stone.

Sacred Citadel is located at Jalan Telawi 5, above the GNC on the 1st floor off Jalan Maarof (turn at McDonald's.) The name refers to the "Potala Palace" of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. Climb the stairs to a Sacred Citadel in Bangsar to find a source of worldly indulgences and spiritual inspiration. Your journey will be abundantly rewarded.

*Carol McKenna Fort, a former stockbroker and corporate trainer, is passionate about Asian art and antiques. She writes about art, travel, culture and antiques and can be reached at [carmckenna@aol.com](mailto:carmckenna@aol.com).*