

THE MONGOLIAN ARTIST ZANABAZAR AND THE MONGOL DEVOTION TO THE FUTURE BUDDHA MAITREYA

URANCHIMEG TSULTEMIN



Fig. 1 Attributed to Zanabazar (1635–1723); Maitreya Bodhisattva; Mongolia; 1680s; gilt bronze with blue pigment in the hair and traces of other pigments in the eyes and mouth; 24 9/16 × 8 7/16 × 7 5/8 in. (62.4 × 21.5 × 19.4 cm); Harvard Art Museums / Arthur M. Sackler Museum; Gift of John West; 1963.5; photograph © President and Fellows of Harvard College

MAITREYA

Mongolia
1680

SUMMARY

Art historian Uranchimeg Tsultemin introduces Mongolia's most extraordinary artist, the reincarnated lama, politician, architect, and sculptor Zanabazar, who built monasteries and sculpted statues of Buddhist deities in his distinctive style. This elegant statue of bodhisattva Maitreya is inspired by ancient Nepalese sculptures. Zanabazar had a special interest in Maitreya, made several sculptures, and initiated the annual ritual Maitreya Procession in Mongolia, which continues in Mongolia today.

The The statue of Maitreya is attributed to Zanabazar (1635–1723), an eminent Mongolian sculptor, architect, Buddhist teacher, and political leader. Maitreya, the buddha of the future, appears in a standing bodhisattva form as a slim and youthful figure holding a ritual ewer (*kundika*) in his left hand and assuming a gesture of discourse (*vitarka* mudra) with his right hand lifted to his chest. Maitreya's second main attribute, a stupa, is piled high on the hair. A deer skin, another attribute of Maitreya, is seen hanging on the left shoulder.

Maitreya displays a slight movement as he stands with his right leg forward, leaning on it and subtly shifting his weight. The lower part of the body is covered by a garment (dhoti), which is made to appear transparent to reveal the shape of the youthful figure and the legs in motion. As the sculpture is cast in bronze, it required a high level of artistry to render the translucence and lightness of the garment. The sculpture is elegant in other details as well, such as the dhoti tied in a flamboyant bow at the waist, and a broad sash that stretches diagonally across the hips, enhancing the delicate liveliness of the figure. A beaded chain that represents a Brahmanic "sacred thread" stretches from the left shoulder across the body, creating a stylish loop under the sash as a skillfully made sartorial ornament. These details augment the voluminosity of the sculpture in a visually subtle, delicate way, as they make asymmetrical linear patterns on the smooth

planar surfaces.¹ As several scholars have shown, this sculpture follows an early, twelfth-century, Nepalese-inspired Maitreya in Nartang Monastery in Tibet, currently lost.² Lotus thrones in the sculptures by Zanabazar are distinct, their round shapes decorated with symmetrically arranged lotus leaves and accentuated with tiny beads, whereas the Newari style is seen in a suave S shape of the posture, the details of the jewelry, and the sartorial ornamentations. Maitreya stands on two platform; the entire sculpture, including the pedestals, is worked all around, and the finely detailed craftsmanship continues on the back as well. All these details indicate the style of works known to be by Zanabazar. He sculpted several similar sculptures of Maitreya, two of which are currently in the Chojjin Lama Temple Museum (fig. 2), Gandan Tegchinling Monastery (fig. 3), in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, with others located elsewhere.³

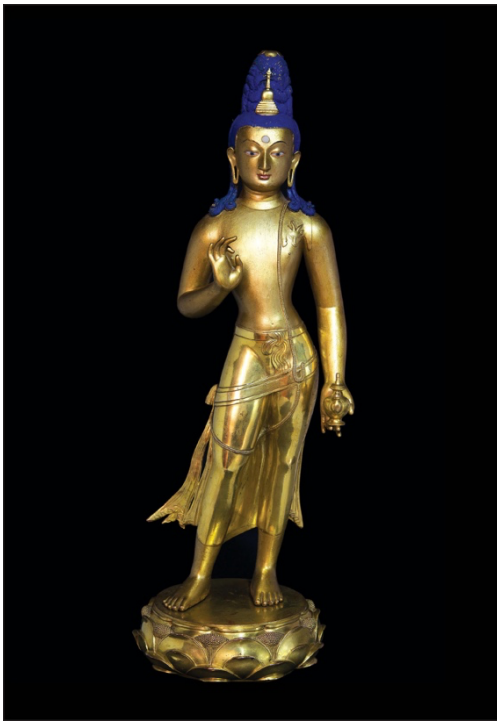


Fig. 2 Zanabazar (1635–1723); Maitreya; Mongolia; 1680s; gilt bronze with blue pigment in the hair; 26³/₄ × 17³/₄ in. (68 × 45 cm); Chojjin Lama Temple Museum, Ulaanbaatar; image after Otgonsüren, D., ed. 2015. *The Masterpieces of Undur Gegeen Zanzabar*. Ulaanaatar: Chojjin Lama Temple Museum



Fig. 3 Zanabazar (1635–1723); Maitreya; Mongolia; 1680s; gilt bronze with blue pigment in the hair; dimensions unknown; Gandan Tegchinling Monastery, Ulaanbaatar

ZANABAZAR

Zanabazar was a descendant of Chinggis Khan (ca. 1162–1227) and was enthroned as the First Jibzundamba reincarnation of the Tibetan historian of the Jonang tradition, Taranatha (1575–1634), at the age of five. In 1639 two khans of Khalkha Mongolia, his own father, Tüshiyetü Khan Gombodorji (1594–1655), and his close ally, Setsen Khan (1577–1652), assembled with other Khalkha noblemen for this occasion, which is recorded in Zanabazar's first biography, written by his disciple, a learned monk, Zaya Pandita Lubsangperinlei (1642–1715).⁴

Zanabazar was the first of altogether eight historical Jibzundamba reincarnations (Khutugtus) of Khalkha Mongolia, the first two identified among the Tüshiyetü Khan's family and the remaining seven discovered in central Tibet.⁵ The discovery of Tibetan reincarnations to rule in Khalkha Mongolia came about because of a shift in Inner Asian power struggles and the rise of the Qing court in Beijing, which now intervened and approved the new Jibzundamba reincarnations. Zanabazar's recognition of this new lineage connecting to Jonang tradition was a Mongol initiative and was later "confirmed" by the Fifth Dalai Lama of Tibet (1617–1682), who sent him a letter from the Potala Palace in 1645, and by the Fourth Panchen Lama (1570–1662) in 1651.⁶ Zanabazar remained active in the social and political life of the region, personally visiting and establishing important alliances with the Tibetan and Qing hierarchs. Thus, he traveled to Tibet twice, visiting monasteries in eastern and central Tibet in 1649–51; in 1655 he made a shorter visit to Tashilhunpo, the main seat of the Fourth Panchen Lama. It was at Tashilhunpo, that Zanabazar took his monastic novice *getsul* vows and received important teachings and initiations from the Panchen Lama, whom he considered his main teacher.

On returning home to Khalkha, Zanabazar disseminated Buddhist teachings among the Khalkha nomads, built monasteries, and created art. He was also a political leader of the Khalkha Mongols and spent many years in Beijing after the Khalkha Mongols' submission to the Qing in 1691 to become a vassal state. Zanabazar was a close friend of the Qing Kangxi emperor (1654–1722). He aided the emperor with healing rituals, consecrated and repaired sacred images, and provided empowerments and rituals for imperial family members.⁷ Zanabazar died in Beijing and was later entombed in Amurbayasgalantu, a special monastery in northern Mongolia, which was built by the Qing Yongzheng emperor (1678–1735) in memory of his father.

Zanabazar's biographers describe him as an avid artist who sculpted precious Buddhist images "with his own hands."⁸ Zanabazar's images suggest a pantheon of deities, including buddhas and bodhisattvas that are seminal to Buddhist practice (fig. 4).⁹ He also made images for his foreign allies, teachers, and patrons. For instance, Zanabazar painted images of Tsongkhapa for Jakhyung Monastery in Amdo, and sculpted a buddha statue and "three gilded sculptures of Manjushri" for the Qing emperor around 1700. Some of these sculptures are still in Beijing.¹⁰

In his dharma seat Ribogejai-Gandan-Shaddubling in northern Mongolia, Zanabazar led a considerable sculpting workshop, creating locally an entire iconographic program with monumental buddhas, mahabodhisattvas, and over three thousand clay buddha sculptures.¹¹ Moreover, Zanabazar designed a new assembly hall for his monasteries based on a tent design (fig. 5). The development of his yurt (*ger*) into a mobile monastery in Yekhe Khüriye also began with Zanabazar.

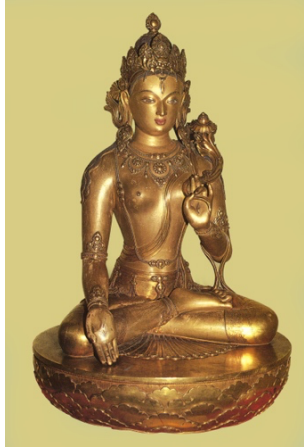


Fig. 4 Zanabazar (1635–1723); White Tara; Mongolia; 1680s; gilt bronze; 27 1/8 × 17 5/8 in. (68.9 × 44.8 cm); Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar



Fig. 5 Zanabazar (1635–1723); Bat-Tsagaan Assembly Hall; Yekhe Khūriye, Mongolia; mid-17th century; felt, wood; photograph courtesy National Central Archives of Mongolia

ZANABAZAR'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MAITREYA

Zanabazar had a special interest in Maitreya, as evidenced in his several sculptures of Maitreya and the rituals of Maitreya he conducted in Mongolia. Bodhisattva Maitreya sculptures were used in the annual ritual Maitreya Procession, held in Geluk monasteries in Mongolia and Tibet (fig. 6). During the Maitreya Procession, the image of Maitreya and Maitreya's texts are carried by the monks in a cart and followed by the lay public, a ritual particularly favored in the Geluk tradition. In Mongolia, several characteristic details in performing this ritual emerge. Unlike Tibetan monasteries, which perform the ritual during the Great Prayer Festival in the early days of the Lunar New Year, the Maitreya Procession in Mongolia is carried out in late spring or early summer. Placing the Maitreya sculpture in a green wooden horse chariot decorated with the colors of the Five Buddhas is also unique to Mongolia. Attendant monks and lay devotees accompany the cart carrying the Maitreya statue, circumambulating the monastery (fig. 7). Another Mongolian hallmark, mentioned in textual records, suggests that the Jibzundamba Khutugtus' Maitreya Procession was carried out in conjunction with the long-life ritual known as *tenzhuk*. The Maitreya Procession at Erdeni Juu began

in 1657, when Zanabazar's twenty-third birthday was celebrated. In 1681 it was carried out again in Erdeni Juu for Zanabazar's forty-seventh birthday.¹²

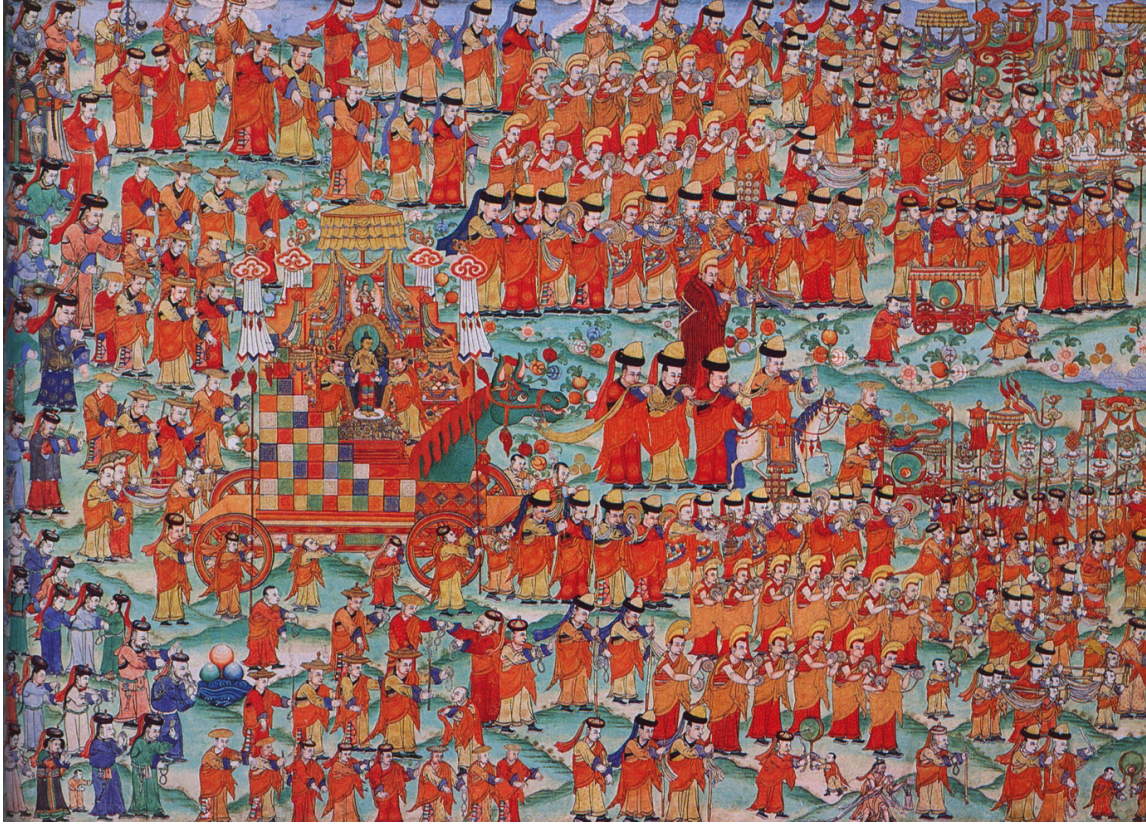


Fig. 6 Gempil-yin Dorji (Mongolian, late 19th–early 20th century); Maitreya Procession at Lama-yin Geegen-ü Khüriye; late 19th–early 20th century; colors on cotton; 27 × 39½ in. (68.6 × 100.2 cm); Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar



Fig. 7 D. Damdinsüren (Mongolian, 1909–1984); Maitreya Procession in Yekhe Khüriye; 1965; colors on cotton; 24-3/8 × 78¾ in. (62 × 200 cm); Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar

One clear source of Zanabazar's interest in Maitreya was in Tashilhunpo Monastery's Maitreya Lhakhang, where the First Dalai Lama, Gendun Drub (1391–1474), built a monumental seated Maitreya statue in 1461, and where Zanabazar's teacher, the Panchen Lama, had his artists create three monumental statues of Maitreya, inscribed in *lanydza* (Nepali: *Ranjana*) and Mongolian scripts, thereby suggesting that the patrons of the statues included Mongol noblemen.¹³ Zanabazar's Maitreya statues were copied in the eighteenth century until this standing form of Maitreya Bodhisattva lost its popularity in Mongolia and was replaced by a seated form of Buddha Maitreya (fig. 8), which was also produced in monumental dimensions akin to monumental sculptures of Maitreya in Geluk monasteries across Inner Asia.¹⁴ The Fifth Jibzundamba (1815–1841) initiated and supported several projects focused on Maitreya in Yekhe Khüriye. In 1833 Yekhe Khüriye's abbot Agwang Khayidub (1779–1838) built a new colossal Maitreya statue measuring about 54 feet (16.5 meters) high, which he placed in the Maitreya Temple designated specifically to house that statue and built in 1820–1822 in a Tibeto-Mongolian architectural style.¹⁵ Agwang Khayidub wrote numerous texts about Maitreya, whereas his patron, the Fifth Jibzundamba, built a new Gandan (Maitreya's Heaven) Monastery in Yekhe Khüriye in 1838. The Mongolian interest in Maitreya continues to this day, as Zanabazar's Maitreya sculpture is now developed into a new monumental statue for a state-of-the-art satellite town on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar (fig. 9).¹⁶ When completed, the new colossal Maitreya will measure 177 feet (54 meters) in height.



Fig. 8 Gendundamba (Mongolian, late 19th–early 20th century); Maitreya; late 19th century; colors on cotton; 83 1/8 × 61 3/4 in. (211 × 157 cm); Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar



Fig. 9 Design for Grand Maitreya Project, work-in-progress; near Ulaanbaatar; planned height: 177 ft. (54 m)

FOOTNOTES

¹ For more on the sculpture, see Marilyn M. Rhie and Robert A.F. Thurman, eds., *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, Exhibition catalog (New York: Tibet House New York in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 141.

² Patricia Berger and Terese Tse Bartholomew, eds., *Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan*, Exhibition catalog (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 281.

³ Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem, *Mongolian Sculpture* (Ulaanbaatar: Gosizdatel'stvo, 1989), figs. 78, 79, show two other sculptures similar to this Maitreya. The current location of these sculptures is unknown.

⁴ See the annotated translation in Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile* (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015).

⁵ During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Mongolia was divided into Outer Mongolia, which is the modern-day independent state of Mongolia, and Inner Mongolia, today the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. The Khalkha are the major ethnic group in (Outer) Mongolia to this day. See Christopher P. Atwood, *Encyclopedia of Mongolia and the Mongol Empire*, (New York: Facts on File, 2004), 299.

⁶ See Samten G. Karmay, *The Illusive Play: The Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama* (Chicago: Serindia, 2014), 10. Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 87–89, translates and discusses a letter the Dalai Lama sent to the ten-year-old Zanabazar. See also Lubsangperinlei, fol. 430, in Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First*

Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015), 118.

⁷ Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 99, referring to Lubsangperinlei, fols. 495, 517, in Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile* (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015), 161, 173.

⁸ Lubsangperinlei, fols. 453–56, in Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile* (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015), 135–37.

⁹ Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020), 52–65.

¹⁰ Lubsangperinlei, fol. 454, in Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile* (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015), 135, 214; Ngag dbang ye shes thub bstan rab 'byams pa (Agwang Ishitübden Rabjamba), “Khyab Bdag 'khor Lo'i Mgon Rje Btsun Dam Pa Blo Bzang Bstan Pa'i Rgyal Mtshan Gyi Rnam Thar Skal Bzang Dad Pa'i Shing Rta,” in *Life and Works of Jibcundampa I*, ed. Lokesh Chandra (New Delhi: Sharada Rani, 1982). On Zanabazar's works in the National Palace Museum, see Luo Wenhua 罗文华, “Gugong cang Menggu tongfo

zaoxiang yanjiu 故宫藏蒙古铜佛造像研究,” *Gugong bowuyuan yuankan 故宫博物院院刊* [Palace Museum Journal] 2 (1999): 81–87. See also images in Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2020), 53.

¹¹ See S. Chuluun, “In Search of the Khutugtu’s Monastery: The Site and Its Heritage. In ‘Buddhist Art of Mongolia: Cross-Cultural Connections, Discoveries and Interpretations,’” trans. Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 8, no. 2 (June) (2019): 244–56, which includes images of works excavated recently in northern Mongolia.

¹² Anna Damdinovna Tsendina, trans., “History of Erdeni Juu (Erdeni Juu-Yin Teüke),” in *Istoriya Erdeni-Dzu: Faksimile Rukopisi; Perevod s Mongol’skogo, Kommentarii i Priloženiya*, Reprint (Moscow: Vostočnaya literatura RAN, 1803) 1999, fols. 15r, 16r; Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *The Biography of the First Khalkha Jetsundampa Zanabazar by Zaya Paṇḍita Luvsanprinlei: Studies, Annotated Translation, Transliteration and Facsimile* (Warsaw: Faculty of Oriental Studies, University of Warsaw, 2015), 132.

¹³ See Ngawang Gelek Demo, ed., *The Autobiography of the First Panchen Lama Blo-Bzang-Chos-Kyi-Rgyal-Mtshan* (New Delhi: Ngawang Gelek Demo, 1969), fols. 413–14.

¹⁴ Colossal Maitreya statues were built in Urga, Yonghegong, Tashilhunpo, and Lhasa, among other places. See Uranchimeg Tsultemin, *A Monastery on the Move: Art and Politics in Later Buddhist Mongolia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2020), 176–86; Kevin Greenwood, “Yonghegong: Imperial Universalism and the Art and Architecture of Beijing’s ‘Lama Temple.’” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2013).

¹⁵ Uranchimeg Tsultemin, “The Power and Authority of Maitreya in Mongolia,” in *Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture, and Society*, ed. Vesna Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 137–59; Ngag dbang mkhas grub (Agwang Khayidub), “Khu Re Chen Mor Bzhengs Pa’i Byams Pa’i Sku Brnyan Gyi Dkar Chag Dad Pa’i Bzhin Ras Gsal Bar Byed Pa’i nor Bu’i Me Long,” in *The Collected Works of Nag-Dban-Mkhas-Grub, Kyai-Rdor Mkhan-Po of Urga: Reproduced under the Instructions of the Ven. Gliñ Rin-Po-Che from a Set of MSS. and Xylographic Prints from the Urga Blocks*, ed. Nag-dban-mkhas-grub, TBRC W16912–0588, vol. 1, fols. 175–273 (Ladakh: S. W. Tashigangpa, 1972); Ngag dbang mkhas grub (Agwang Khayidub), “Rgyal Ba Byams Mgon Gyi Dang Po Thugs Bskyed Pa Nas Bzung Sa Lam Rim Par Bgrod de Mngon Par Byang Chub Pa’i Tshul Las Brtsams Shing Ma ’ongs Pa Na Sangs Rgyas Lnga Pa’i Mdzad Pa Ji Ltar Ston Tshul Gsal Bar Brjod Pa’i Sgo Nas Bstod Cing Gsol Ba ’debs Pa’i Rab Tu Byed Pa Byams Mgon Zhal Bzang Lta Ba’i Dga’ Ston,” in *The Collected Works of Nag-Dban-Mkhas-Grub, Kyai-Rdor Mkhan-Po of Urga: Reproduced under the Instructions of the Ven. Gliñ Rin-Po-Che from a Set of MSS. and Xylographic Prints from the Urga Blocks*, ed. Nag-dban-mkhas-grub, TBRC W16912–0588, vol. 1, fols. 155–65 (Ladakh: S. W. Tashigangpa, 1972).

¹⁶ See Isabelle Charleux, “The Grand Maitreya Project of Mongolia: A Colossal Statue-Cum-Stupa for a Happy Future of ‘Loving ♡ Kindness,’” *Contemporary Buddhism* 21, no. 1–2 (2020): 73–132, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2021.1985352>.

FURTHER READING

Chuluun, S. 2019. “In Search of the Khutugtu’s Monastery: The Site and Its Heritage.” Translated by Uranchimeg Tsultemin. In “Buddhist Art of Mongolia: Cross-Cultural Connections, Discoveries and Interpretations,” edited by Uranchimeg Tsultemin, special issue, *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 8, no. 2 (June): 244–56. <https://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-31/chuluun8>.

Tsultem, Nyam-Osoryn. 1982. *The Eminent Mongolian Sculptor—G. Zanabazar*. Ulaanbaatar: Gosizdatel'stvo.

Tsultemin, Uranchimeg. 2015. "The Power and Authority of Maitreya in Mongolia." In *Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture, and Society*, edited by Vesna Wallace, 137–59. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CITATION

Uranchimeg Tsultemin, "Maitreya: The Mongolian Artist Zanabazar and the Mongol Devotion to the Future Buddha Maitreya," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/maitreya>.

ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today. Along with a [digital platform](#) and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the [Rubin's Project Himalayan Art](#), an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at: <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart>