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Classroom Resources

World Views: Maps in Art

Mandala of Chakrasamvara, 1590



Nepal
Mandala of Chakrasamvara, 1590
Opaque watercolor on cotton
46 x 34 5/8 in.
LACMA, Museum Acquisition Fund, M.73.2.1
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Map of the Cosmos

This is a mandala, a map of the universe that is used for meditation. Worshipers in many religions—including Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism—use mandalas. This is a Buddhist mandala and represents the Buddhist universe, which consists of the earthly world—in which we live—and the spiritual world, where the deities live.

- Compare this mandala with others, including mandalas from other cultures. See if you can find similar elements in this and other mandalas.

Things to Notice

The outermost circle of this mandala represents the everyday world. If you look closely, you can see tiny people and other figures. Moving toward the center of the mandala, you can see a large square that represents the walls of a palace. The palace is divided into four triangles. Each of the triangles is a different color, corresponding to the four primary directions: East, which is always on the bottom, is blue.

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Next, look for the gates to the palace. Located on each side of the palace, the decorated, arched doorways resemble those found on Buddhist temples. As you move closer to the center of the mandala, you travel from the everyday world of suffering into spiritual realms (represented by the concentric circles inside the square palace). At the very center of the mandala, you reach Mount Meru, the home of the deities. Here you will find Chakrasamvara, a popular Buddhist deity in Nepal, and his female partner, Vajravarahi. (Chakrasamvara is deep blue and Vajravarahi is red.)

Reaching the Center

A Buddhist worshiper uses a mandala as an aid in meditation: The mandala helps the worshiper visualize the spiritual world and to focus his or her thoughts. The center represents nirvana, the bliss of reaching enlightenment, the goal of meditation. The mandala represents a passage both through a space (the cosmos), and also through states of mind or being. The center is the most important part: As you move to the center, you are ascending into more spiritual realms, and in your meditation, you leave your everyday world and enter a more spiritual state.

- Make a mandala that maps your idealized view of the universe. You may want to start by making a geometric pattern, such as a series of circles within a square. In the center, you may want to place an ideal or goal you would like to reach. In the outer circles, you might depict everyday distractions or obstacles to reaching your goal.
- The center of the mandala has a special significance. Look at a variety of maps and note what is in the center. Most countries put themselves at the center of the world map. For example, on many maps of the world printed in the United States, the U.S. is at the center of the map, and Eurasia is divided. On a Japanese map, the United States is often divided along the edges of the map. Why would the center have a special significance? Why would it matter where the continents are placed?

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