

Tibetans Preserve Way of Life

■ Exhibit focuses on how the resettlement community in Santa Fe is attempting to keep a culture in exile alive

BY ELLIE BECKER
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"When the iron bird flies and horses run on wheels, the Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the face of the earth, and the dharma will come to the land of the red men." — prophecy attributed to Phadmasambhava, eighth century Indian sage.

How can a people exiled from their homeland keep their culture intact?

A new exhibition at the Museum of International Folk Art, "At Home Away from Home: Tibetan Culture in Exile," focuses on how the Tibetan resettlement community in Santa Fe is attempting to do just that.

The exhibition, which opened Sunday, was highlighted by an opening ritual to inaugurate the creation of an intricate kalachakra sand mandala (Wheel of Time).

The venerable Lobsang Samten and his assistant, Thupten Chonyi, both of the Tibetan Buddhist Center of Philadelphia, sat cross-legged as they chanted prayers before a group of more than 150 silent observers. The two then rose and began working on the mandala.

Choosing from bowls filled with different colors of sand, they used serrated metal instruments called chakpus, filling them with the sand.

By gently rapping the chakpu with another instrument, a steady flow of sand is created. The instrument



KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE: At left, Tenzin Tsewang, right, and Dechen Tsewang perform a traditional Tibetan dance at the opening of an exhibit on Tibetan culture in exile at the Museum of International Folk Art.

vibrates, and depending on the vibration, differing amounts of sand flow slowly to fill in the pre-painted design. From one to five layers of sand are applied to different areas of the design.

The mandala, which means "circle" in Sanskrit, represents a flattened version of the deity Kalachakra's palace. Those initiated into the Kalachakra theology believe that when the next world order replaces the current one, all those initiated will be reborn in Shambhala, the perfect kingdom.

Both the design and the ritual are steeped in meaning. Designs in Tibetan tantric Buddhism are visual aids for meditation.

"It is the same meaning always, so it is always the same design," Samten said.

Samten, a former Buddhist monk, was the first to demonstrate the art of sand-painting mandalas in the United States. He arrived in 1988 and created a mandala in New York City, with sand he transported in suitcases from India.

"It was very heavy," Samten said, "and I decided I must find sand in the U.S. Since then he has helped create numerous mandalas in cities throughout the country.

Exhibit curator Frank J. Korom said that when done for religious purpose the mandala is completed in four days and then destroyed. When done in a secular context, times of completion vary. This one will be finished by April 19.

"But it depends on the museum schedule," Samten said. Smiling broadly, he added, "We take a lot of tea breaks."

The mandala will remain inside the museum until February, after which the sand will be gathered and returned to the Earth.

When China took over Tibet in 1959, the 14th Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhism, fled to India where he set up a government in exile. Since that time nearly all of Tibet's 6,000 monasteries have been destroyed.

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More than 1 million Tibetans have died as a result of the Chinese occupation, and about 130,000 live in exile in other countries, mostly in India. The U.S.-Tibetan Resettlement Program began in 1992, allowing 1,000 refugees living in exile in India and Nepal to move to the United States. The Tibetan population in Santa Fe numbers about 100.

Tibetans in exile hope to return to their country in freedom one day, although perhaps not in their current lifetime, Korom said. Most of their efforts emphasize educating the young on all aspects of Tibetan

culture.

The museum exhibit also includes a typical Tibetan living room, a Tibetan picnic tent and several dozen paintings by youths aged 13 to 21 who live at the Tibetan Homes Foundation in Mussoorie, India.

The foundation was established in 1962 to protect and aid Tibetan refugees. The primary focus is to maintain and promote Tibetan culture.

The paintings are divided into three thematic sections pertaining to refugee life: leaving Tibet, political impressions about conditions in Tibet and a reflection on images of

home.

Also on display are photographs by Santa Fe photographer Kitty Leaken depicting life at the school in Mussoorie as well as life in Santa Fe's Tibetan community. Videos on mandalas and painter Dorjee Gyaltzen will be shown continuously.

A number of related events are planned through July, including a film series, a lecture series and a rug-weaving workshop. March 15 is Celebrate Tibet Day at the museum, with a variety of presentations and activities scheduled.

For more information call 827-6350.