

Footprints on the sands of time: Mary Russell talks to four Tibetan ...

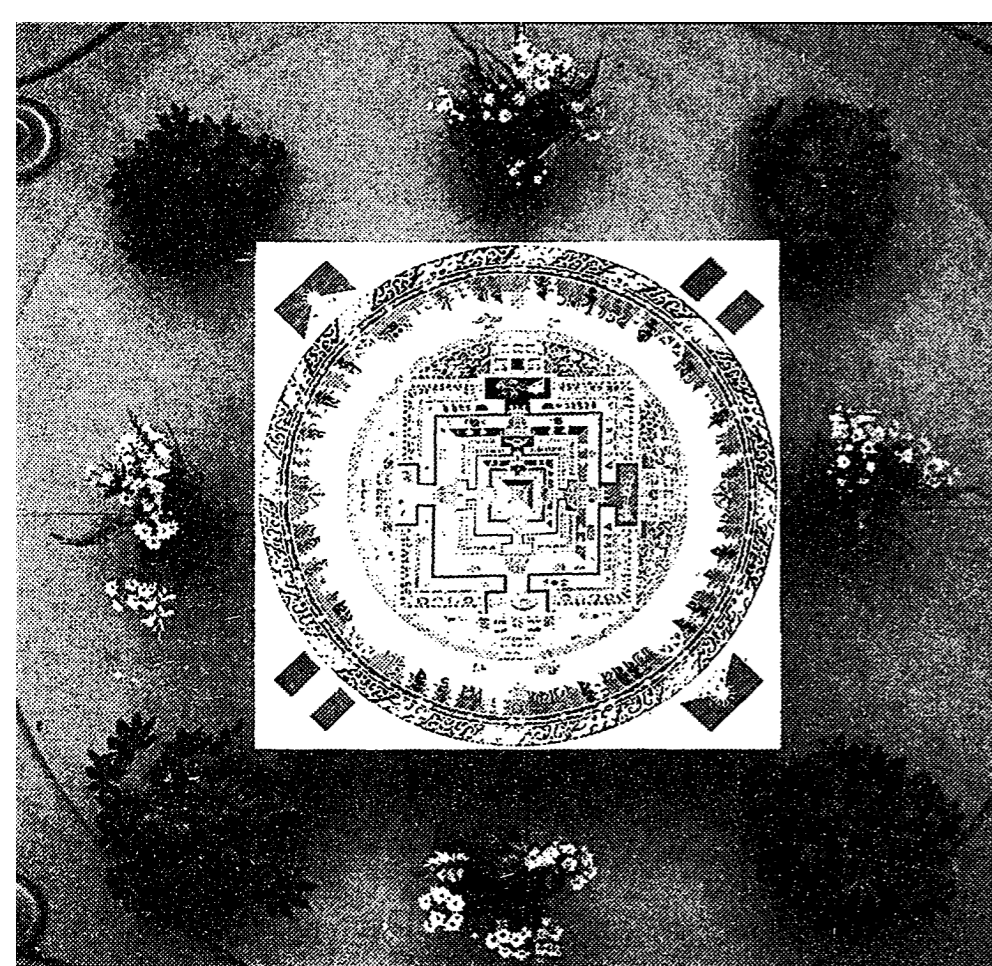
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The sand mandala forms part of a continuum of artistic expression



Above: The Kalachakra Sand Mandala. Right: Tenzin Kunkhen, Lobsang Tashi, Tenzin Khenpe and Tenzin Thaye, the four Tibetan Buddhist monks who will be working on the mandala, pictured in Trinity College. Photograph: Frank Miller



Footprints on the sands of time

TONIGHT in Dublin's Douglas Hyde Gallery, before an invited audience and in the presence of the President, Mrs Robinson, four Tibetan monks will perform a ceremonial dance which will form the first stage in the making of the Kalachakra Mandala, a sand painting representing some of the teachings of Buddha and handed down by him to his followers some 2,000 years ago.

A mandala — the word means circle — is a complex, two-dimensional pattern of squares and circles, something akin to an architect's drawing of a dwelling. In this case it represents a palace, in which there are a number of "deities," which themselves symbolise not gods but aspects of the enlightened mind. The Kalachakra Mandala — the Circle of Time — forms part of the Kalachakra system of meditation and is considered to bring peace and harmony both to those who create it and those who contemplate it.

Mary Russell talks to four Tibetan monks, here for the next three weeks to create a sand painting representing some of the teachings of Buddha, and to John Hutchinson director of the Douglas Hyde Gallery where they will be working

The idea of bringing the monks here from their Buddhist monastery in Dharamsala in India, came to the gallery's director, John Hutchinson, after he had seen a major exhibition of Tibetan art in London: "I was looking for something that would give expression to two things — the question of identity and that of the spirit. In the sand mandala both of these are present, though in a way that may seem alien to the European mind. Other shows we have had here have centred on expressions of identity, what it is to be 'me' — the I and the Not-I.

"The sand mandala, on the other hand, represents the dissolution of the ego: it's created by a group of people, it's without individuality and it has no commer-

cial value. At the same time, it centres on the spiritual aspect of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the cultural and political identity of Tibetans."

At that moment, as if on cue, his phone rang. It was an official from the Chinese Embassy, ringing to express concern that there was a reference to the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 in the gallery's catalogue. One aspect of the exhibition had already engendered a response!

The sand mandala, unique in itself, nevertheless forms part of a continuum of artistic expression seen recently at the Douglas Hyde Gallery. "We've had here," says John Hutchinson, "a show by Wolfgang Laib which included a piece consisting of pollen col-

lected by the artist, the gathering of which was a contemplative activity very close to the making of a mandala."

Talk of contemplation and the dissolution of the ego might give the impression that the Tibetan monks are themselves surrounded by an invisible cloud of oriental mysticism. Nothing could be further from the truth. When I met them, they had just returned from a visit to Newgrange and were having tea with Gordon Campbell, owner of The Gap fashion store and the main sponsor of the exhibition.

"We are a team of four," explained Tenzin Kunkhen. "Two of us work on the mandala, one watches out for any mistakes we might make — and the last person

makes the tea."

It takes two years to study the Sanskrit text of the Kalachakra Mandala. After that, the monks have to memorise the pattern and colour schemes. Finally, they have to take an exam.

SITTING around the Campbell tea-table, we looked at a picture of the Kalachakra, marvelling at the intricate detail of the sand patterns while Kunkhen — the nods and expansive smiles of his brother-monks compensating for their lack of English — explained the significance of some of the symbols: "The centre of the palace is where the main deity resides. It is protected by four gatehouses and each of those is a different colour, representing the

four points of the compass. Each gatehouse is bordered by a garden of flowers and certain petals of the flowers symbolise the female in nature."

The gatehouses, representing among other things birth and death, are surrounded by coloured circles, blue for example standing for water and red for fire.

Sand, he explained, is used because it embodies the concept of unaccountability, the infinite in nature. The idea of unity is found in the co-operative aspect of the work — it cannot be made by one person alone.

Before starting work, the monks meditate, visualise the Kalachakra and transform their bodies into the mandala. "Be-

cause," as Kunkhen explained, "the real mandala is within."

The exhibition — the first of its kind in Ireland — will include photographs of Tibet and its people, as well as painted scrolls known as tangkas. Members of the public will be able to watch the monks working on the mandala, which will take three weeks to complete. Then, on February 28th, according to tradition, the sand will be collected into a chalice and carried in a ceremonial procession to the Liffey and cast upon the waters as an offering to the deity of the ocean — for nothing in this life is permanent.

● The Kalachakra Sand Mandala exhibition at the Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin runs February 9th-28th, Tuesday to Saturday inclusive. Open each day 11 am-6 pm, closing Thursdays at 7 pm and Saturdays at 4.45 pm. Admission free. The monks will be working at the gallery most afternoons. Telephone: 01 702 1116. If you feel moved to join the final procession, contact the gallery nearer the date.