

Insights on shaman life

UCSB'S NEW EXHIBIT 'HOW TO MAKE THE UNIVERSE RIGHT' PRESENTS THE ENIGMATIC, HISTORICAL AND SPIRITUALLY CHARGED WORLD OF ASIAN MOUNTAIN CULTURES

By Josef Woodard,
News-Press Correspondent



"How to Make the Universe Right: The Art of the Shaman in Vietnam and Southern China"

When: Through May 1

Where: Art, Design & Architecture Museum, UCSB

Hours: 12-5 p.m. Wednesday-Sunday

Information: 893-2951, museum.ucsb.edu

By and large, the especially inclusive moniker of the UCSB Art, Design & Architecture Museum — a name-change replacing the older, more general UCSB Art Museum, manages to cover the range of shows passing through these portals, especially given the periodic presence of architecture-related shows. There are exceptions, such as the fascinating and slightly out-of-the-box exhibition currently on view in the museum's main gallery, the very title of which indicates something very different in the museum space: "How to Make the Universe Right: The Art of the Shaman in Vietnam and Southern China." Add Shamanistic ritual and pockets of Asian history to the AD&A's list of museum attributes.

In this show of precious scroll paintings, ceremonial objects, Shamanistic garb, elaborate masks and headdresses, weaponry and other accoutrements of a life and belief system apart from contemporary Western existence, we are duly transported to another mindset. The sum effect is a visitation to Asian mountain culture, especially involving Shamanistic practice and spiritual doctrines, with roots dating back two millennia, and links to Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Animism.

Drawn mostly from Jill and Barry Kitnick's collection and curated by Barry Kitnick, Dan Mills and Bates College professor of art history Trian Nguyen, the exhibition is beautiful and meditative in its very design, with variously colored walls, a sense of atmospheric balance and poise and the refreshing absence of wall



Barry Kitnick photos

Forehead mask, General Zhongyuan, early 20th century

texts to distract from the purer experience of the scrolls and other pieces. Of course, except for those well-equipped with knowledge of this culture and its signifiers, it helps greatly to take one of the detailed booklets at the front desk, explaining each section of the carefully laid-out show.

On the wall facing the entrance to the main gallery, for instance, we fittingly find scrolls in "The Administration," for newly ordained Yao shaman priests, on the initiation path. On the backside of that floating wall is a set of eight scrolls dealing with the "Buddhist Trinity," of past, present and future.

Most dramatically, and a rarity in the culture of ancient scrolls, the long back wall of the main gallery hosts a sweeping display of 18 separate scrolls presenting a full

pantheon of a fully ordained Yao Shaman, dating back to 1819. A composite of animals, deities, people and ornate formal designs, the scrolls are packed with small echoing visual designs and faces, with the central trio of heroic figures known as "Three Pure Ones." Also in the dense pictorial mesh of the scrolls are "Four Heavenly Messengers" and "Ten Kings of Hell."

Long vertical scrolls on another wall are used as meditative tools to pray for the dead and guide spirits to heaven.

Another salient feature is an elegant, evenly spaced procession of dragon robes, priestly garments worn by shamans, which are also illustrated with symbolic embroidery, related to some of the imagery in the scroll paintings. The parade of almost figurative robes in the gallery lead to a set of masks and headdresses with stoles, fanciful multi-colored banners used in special ritual ceremonies.

Ritual weapons, swords, daggers and staffs are seen in display cases close to a collection of musical instruments — gongs, water buffalo horns, cymbals and drums — used in sacred rituals. Another case presents a selection of "divination blocks," empowered objects made of bamboo, wood or animal horn and designed with implications of "yin" and "yang" on either side.

If the main gallery's orderly, contemplative layout balances elements of grandeur and intimacy, of minutiae and spectacle, the museum's back gallery moves in a different direction, moving from the temple to the private home. A wooden façade and corrugated half-roof structure creates a facsimile of a shrine along the lines of a "house altar," with tablets, scepters and "power sticks," as well as offerings of rice, incense and money.

At a time when contemporary art from China and elsewhere in Asia is gaining visibility on the international scene, the presence of this valuable and rare vintage material helps to fill out the complex story of Asian art and spirituality — and the twain thereof. All in all, "How to Make the Universe Right: The Art of the Shaman in Vietnam and Southern China" is one of those illuminating exhibitions that serves to instruct and enlighten, giving us a window into another time, place, spirituality... and sense of how the universe can be righted.



Scroll, Tai Wai the High Constable, dated 1899

Robe, textile and embroidery on display at UCSB's AD&A Museum