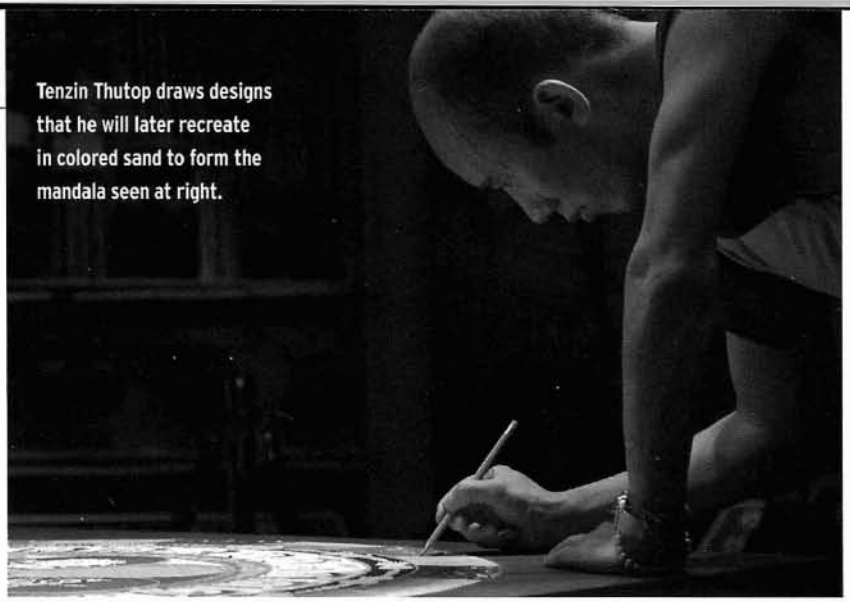
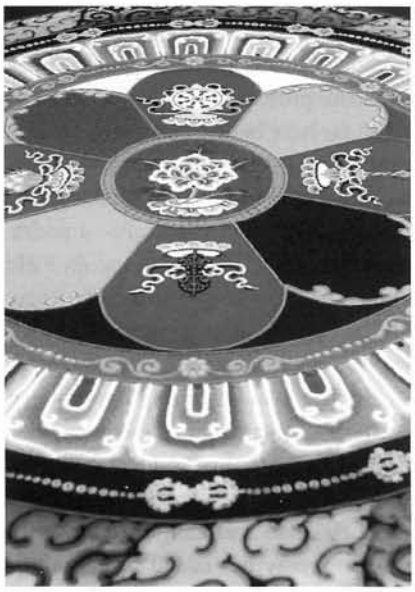


Tenzin Thutop draws designs that he will later recreate in colored sand to form the mandala seen at right.



All Is Flux

It's not every day you'll see artists throw a masterpiece in a river.

[EPHEMERA] THE ARTISTS used an unusual medium that encouraged an unusual approach. Tibetan Buddhist monks Tenzin Thutop and Lobsang Gyaltsen, representing the Dalai Lama's Namgyal Monastery in India (via its satellite branch in Ithaca, New York), were on campus to demonstrate the Tibetan Buddhist ritual art of sand mandalas. For four days they labored painstakingly to create, one grain at a time, an exquisite sand painting that measured four feet in diameter and represented the dwelling place of a buddha.

Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhists use sand mandalas as visualization aids for meditation during certain religious ceremonies. According to Kevin P. Smith, deputy director of Brown's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology, which brought the monks to campus, they have only been displayed outside this ritual context since 1988. The Dalai Lama, he says, allowed the public creation and viewing of mandalas "as a way of reaching out to the world and extending the blessings associated with it." Namgyal Monastery's Web site says the Dalai Lama hoped it would help preserve Tibetan culture and bring benefit, "as it would enhance the lives of all living beings near the construction site."

The monks' visit was sponsored by the Barbara Greenwald Memorial Arts Program, whose purpose is to bring non-Western arts to campus and the general public "in a living way." Earlier events have included Inuit printmaking demonstrations and Laotian classical music and dance. Unlike traditional static exhibits, these "give artists the voice to explain and discuss their role in society and their view of the world," Smith says.

In this case, the monks "spoke" mostly through their silence. In Haffenreffer's Manning Hall Gallery off the College Green, they worked under bright lights to the rhythm of recorded Tibetan chanting. They filled cone-shaped tools from a bright palette of sands, arranged by color in plastic cups that bore the Brown seal. Gently rasping one metal cone against

MARY BETH MEEHAN (4)

[LISTENING IN]

"What are the rules that we as a preeminent power ought to establish now so that in twenty years we're not on the receiving end of Chinese exceptionalism?"

Retired U.S. Army General Wesley Clark in a speech at the Salomon Center on November 28.

another, each monk scattered a few grains at a time, gradually developing a design of intricate pattern and delicate detail. Onlookers stood quietly transfixed.

Keni Sturgeon, the Haffenreffer's curator of programs and education, remarked that the silence was unusual for museumgoers. "I think it communicates a certain reverence, a sense that something important is happening."

Many visitors returned day after day. Sturgeon says she was struck that some students brought books with them and stayed for hours. "They'll watch for ten minutes or so, then they'll read for awhile, then they'll watch again and take some pictures, and then they'll read some more. It is something that doesn't usually happen in a museum exhibit. Usually people come to look and move on."

For this program the monks created the mandala of the Buddha of compassion, Chenrezig. The monks began each day with prayers and chanting. As they worked, Thutop said, they tried to generate compassion and reflect on the meaning of the symbols. He said he hoped onlookers would get "an imprint of compassion" through seeing the design, watching them work, and reading the written explanations. "The mandala itself carries some energy," he added.

After the monks finished the mandala, nearly 200 people watched them ritually dismantle it and sweep the sand into a vase. The monks then led a procession down College Hill to the Providence River and poured the sand into the water, blessing its inhabitants.

Thutop said he didn't feel a sense of loss when he destroyed a mandala. Buddhism sees everything—including our faith, our views, and our identity—as transitory, he explained: "We shouldn't cling." By contrast, Sturgeon says, the Western way "is geared toward permanence and keeping things and collecting things."

Thutop added that impermanence also has a creative aspect. Since the mandala has a beginning, it also has an end, he said.

And because it has an end, there is a possibility for a new beginning.

–LINDA HEUMAN

FRANK MULLIN (2)

Choose Your Words Carefully

Writing would be much easier, says Salmon Rushdie, if its purpose were merely to entertain.

[CENSORSHIP] The writers up on the Salomon Center stage may have come from different countries, but they all had one thing in common—they've been persecuted for speaking their minds.

"We are gambling with our lives when we choose a word," said Iranian novelist Shahriar Mandanipour about the lack of free expression in his native land. Mandanipour spoke at a panel on freedom of expression that was part of a weeklong program titled "Strange Times, My Dear: A Freedom-to-Write Literary Festival." Speaking alongside Mandanipour was 2006 Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, who was threatened with imprisonment in his native Turkey after he spoke openly about the early twentieth-century mass murder of Armenians there.

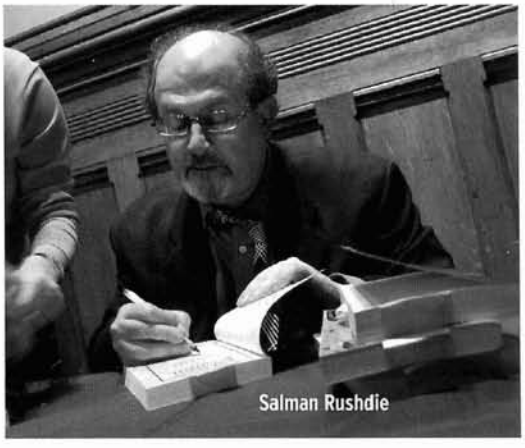
At the forum Pamuk said he preferred not to speak about his battle with the Turkish government. "I don't want to go into it," he responded when a student asked about his experience, which ended in late 2005 after the government dropped all charges.


Orhan Pamuk

Instead, Pamuk said, he worried about censorship in the West. As immigrants from the East enter Europe, he said, they are "very roughly treated." As a result, when they perceive insults against their culture they call for less free speech or the banning of certain books. Then, he said, Western governments ignore the underlying issues of racism and cheap labor and instead "choose to ban books, plays, and films just to please these immigrants."

The festival featured a one-on-one conversation with Salman Rushdie, who in 1989 famously became the target of a fatwa offering a reward for his murder. In an interview with conference organizer Robert Coover, the T.B. Stowell Adjunct Professor of Literary Arts, Rushdie said that writers have an obligation to be more than entertainers. "It would give us [writers] a much better life if we were entertaining," he said, "if all we were doing was to put things out there to give people a pleasing evening."

Rushdie said the writer should be less a political activist than an excavator of the memories and experiences a society wishes to suppress. "It's not a question of seeking out a political conflict," he explained, "but simply remembering the way it was."


Salman Rushdie

Rushdie noted he will be starring as a gynecologist in an upcoming movie directed by Helen Hunt. "Helen said that when she wrote the part she was thinking of Salman," Rushdie said. "I have been thinking what it means that when Helen Hunt thinks of me, she thinks of her gynecologist."

–LAWRENCE GOODMAN