

LINING UP THE BUDDHA'S NOSE

Putting together a show with skill, humor and blood

Art historians have secret wishes about the art they study. For me, it's always been the desire to run my fingertips over J.M.W. Turner's *Rain, Steam and Speed*, to feel the thickness of the paint on Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, to stroke the sleek bronze of Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space*.

But for museum exhibition folks like Rick Gehrke, handling the art comes as part of the job. On Thursday, Jan. 10, the staff of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art began mounting the "Buddhist Visions" show, a large task thanks to monumental statues, heavy scroll paintings and a desire to keep the religious items accessible yet safe.

One day earlier, about 20 different people helped move the 3,000 lb. *Seated Buddha (Maitreya)*, a 12th century (Jin dynasty) marble piece from China, from the vault up to the exhibition space. Now the statue surveys the day's events with calm mien despite its missing nose.

Gehrke, the museum's photographer and interim exhibitions manager, brings from the museum's vault a 15th century Chinese scroll called *Medicine Buddha and His Court*. Gehrke and experienced exhibition temp worker Casey Wanlass (both of them wearing white cotton gloves) lay the scroll on a quilt-covered table in the center of the high-ceilinged space. Slowly, they roll it out to gasps of pleasure from the curator and other museum staff, and they measure it. Asian art curator Charles Lachman points out the script that pin points to the date the scroll was first used.

Then it's time for math: "Put it 19 inches from the floor," says Lachman.

"Nineteen inches ... plus ... how big was it again?" Gehrke asks. Wanlass responds, and there's some back and forth about math skills. Soon, quickly but carefully, they

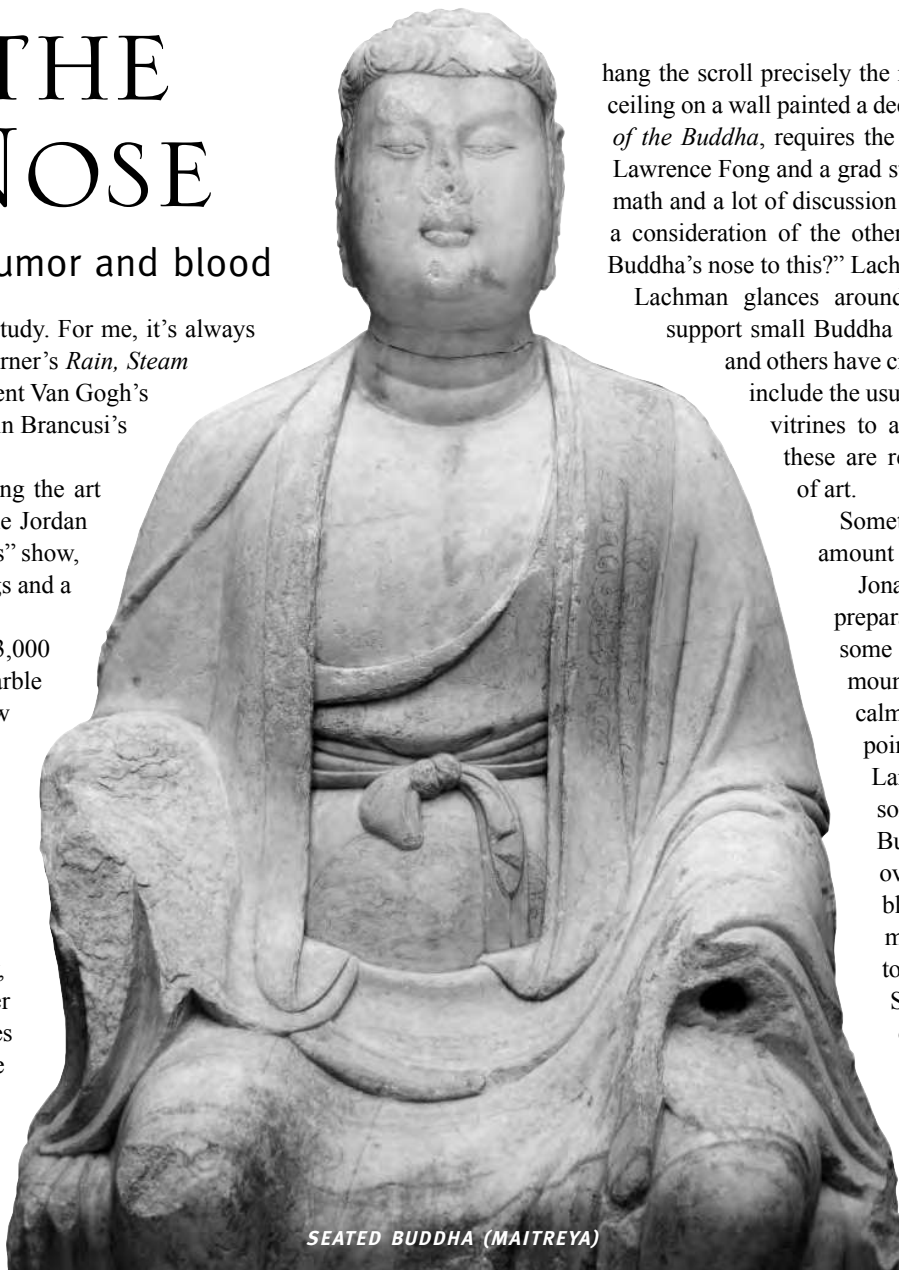
hang the scroll precisely the right distance from the floor and ceiling on a wall painted a deep blue. A larger scroll, the *Death of the Buddha*, requires the help of JSMA assistant director Lawrence Fong and a grad student intern. That requires more math and a lot of discussion of ceiling height, not to mention a consideration of the other pieces. "Are we lining up the Buddha's nose to this?" Lachman asks.

Lachman glances around at the pedestals prepared to support small Buddha and bodhisattva statues. Gehrke and others have created barriers to touch that don't include the usual glass boxes. "I wanted to keep vitrines to a minimum," he says. After all, these are religious objects, not just pieces of art.

Sometimes, they require a certain amount of sacrifice.

Jonathan Smith, a tall, lanky preparator, wheels up a cart holding some sutra pages that he has carefully mounted, matted and framed in calming, compact patterns. Lachman points out that they're from the Pure Land tradition, which means that some of the pages are simply the Buddha's name written over and over again — in some places, in blood. "It's a way of generating merit," he says. As Lachman turns to place the framed sutras back on Smith's cart, he slices his finger on the back of the frame.

Lachman could generate his own merit on the precious scrolls, but he grabs a Band-aid from the first aid kit in the elevator, dons white cotton gloves and moves back in to help. — Suzi Steffen



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