

Butter Sculpture

Butter sculpture is an ancient Tibetan Buddhist art. Although it is not as well known as another Tibetan ritual art, the sand mandala it is still an important aspect of Tibetan Buddhism in its own right. They symbolize impermanence, (a main tenet of Buddhism,) along with more ritualistic components, and are usually destroyed in anywhere from a day to a few years. They are traditionally made with yak butter, but in exiled Tibetan communities, as the weather is usually warmer, it is made with ghee, fat, and wax. Butter sculptures are displayed on altars and shrines in monasteries or family homes. They are traditionally made every Losar, the Tibetan New Year, and for the Butter Sculpture Festival, part of the Great Prayer Festival, or "Monlam Chenmo" that is held soon after Losar. In it, monks made huge, story high butter sculptures displayed outside the Jokhang in Lhasa, the holiest temple in Tibetan Buddhism.

Butter sculptures are displayed in many different ways;



on a paddle,



or as free standing sculptures.

They are usually made in the form of flowers, "metog," or traditional symbols, or even monasteries themselves.



A third kind is as a decoration on [tsampa](#) cones, called tormas, which are used as a kind of "sacrificial cake."*

"The front faces of many tormas are commonly decorated with a series of flat butter-sculptured discs which either ascend vertically or are arranged in a cross formation...these discs represent the petals of flowers...multicolored and multi-petalled flower and lotus designs are meticulously sculpted on the most elaborate tormas."*

Even if one does not practice Tibetan Buddhism, its butter sculptures can still be viewed, and even made, with appreciation of the art and skill used.

*Quotes are from *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, by Robert Beer. (pg. 321)