

# Pathways to Paradise

## Medieval India and Europe

The word “paradise” often describes an idyllic place of unmatched beauty, but it can also refer to a mindset of harmony and bliss. Several world religions share these conceptions of paradise, but the paths for locating it—whether a physical environment, a metaphysical realm such as heaven, or a state of transcendence—have varied greatly. In the premodern era, people journeyed from their homelands to destinations across Asia, Africa, and Europe in pursuit of paradise or to discover precious materials believed to have great symbolic or scientific significance. In this exhibition, works of art from the Getty Museum, grouped with important loans from local institutions and private collections, explore the ways that decorated books and portable luxury objects reflected their owners’ knowledge of and ideas about the greater world as well as their spiritual quests for sacred groves, providential gems, and guides to enlightenment.



## Books for Transcendence

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Manuscripts often communicated complex beliefs about otherworldly domains or beings, inviting readers to connect with spiritual realms or to envision the afterlife—states of paradise beyond the earth. The books in this

case and the pages on the wall at left concern theological beliefs about angels and spirits as well as descriptions of astral phenomena such as constellations and the circumference of planets.

## Imagining India

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The histories of empires in the Subcontinent, Hindu Kush, and Tibetan Plateau were long intertwined with principalities to the west, from the Greeks and Romans to the Persian, Christian, and Islamic kingdoms of Central and Western Asia or East Africa. For example, sculpture from the kingdom of Gandhara (present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan)

combined elements from local and distant traditions (as in the *Head of a Bodhisattva*, shown nearby). From ancient times the histories of Mediterranean peoples recorded contact with the land of India as well as imaginary notions of its peoples, religions, and natural wonders. Actual contact increased in the Middle Ages.

## The Power of Gems and Precious Materials

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Throughout the premodern world, people traveled frequently, at times transporting manuscripts and luxury items. The ivory at the center of this case, for example, likely came from the tusk of an African elephant, and once carved, it adorned the cover of a Gospel book from Central Europe. While precious goods such as jewelry, amulets, and reliquaries were highly portable and could be

carried over great distances, other objects—including crowns, oil lamps, and votive statues—could serve local audiences at court, in temples, or in shrines. The raw materials in the case were highly prized trade goods. Many cultures and religions ascribe magical or healing properties to gems or metals, associations often based on ideas about the divine and the afterlife.

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