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

y and large, the especially inclusive monk 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 headaddresses, 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 Tian Nguyen, the exhibition is a beautifully meditative in its very design, with variously colored walls, a sense of atmospheric balance and poised and the refreshing absence of wall 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.