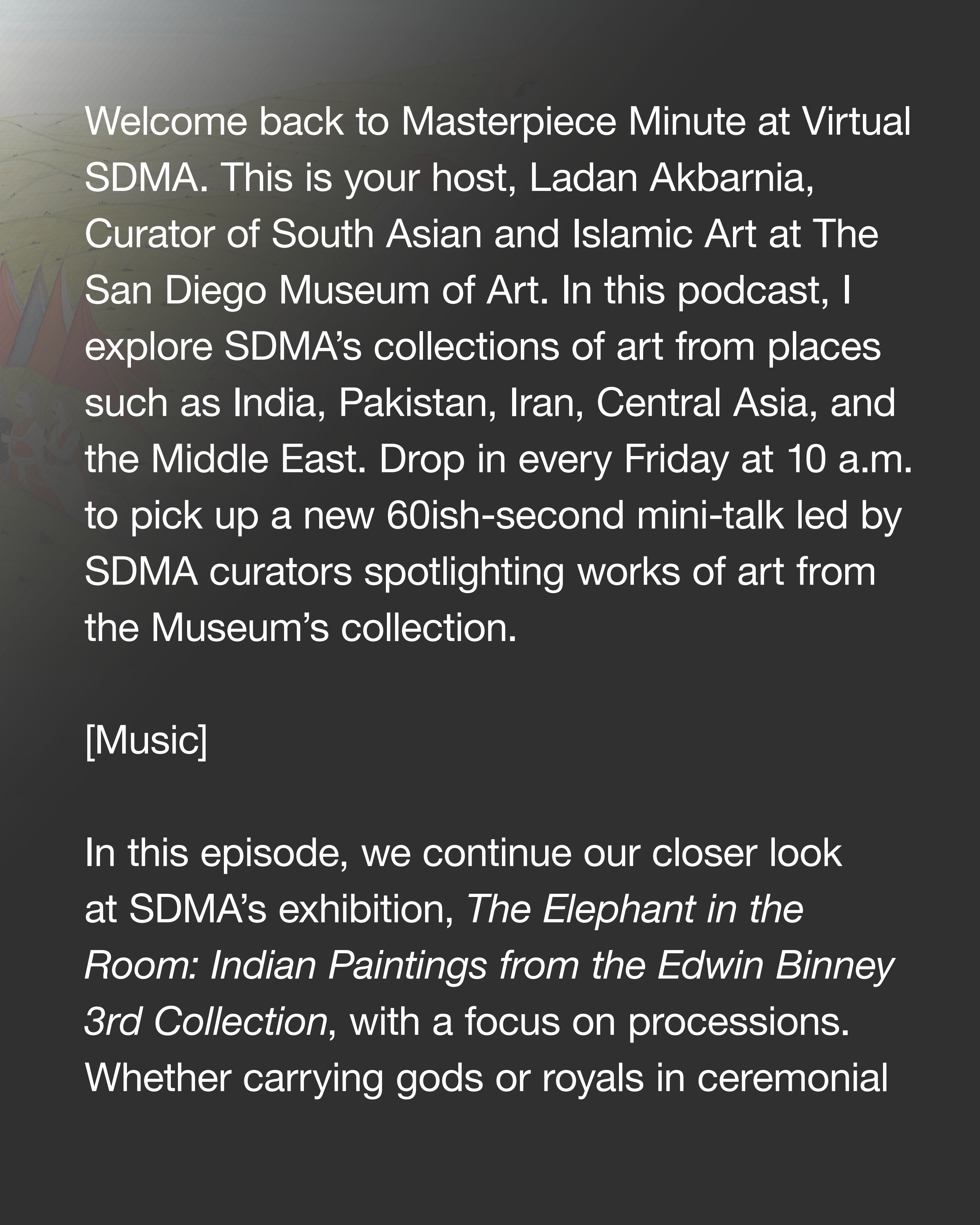


MASTERPIECE MINUTE





Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I explore SDMA's collections of art from places such as India, Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Drop in every Friday at 10 a.m. to pick up a new 60ish-second mini-talk led by SDMA curators spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

[Music]

In this episode, we continue our closer look at SDMA's exhibition, *The Elephant in the Room: Indian Paintings from the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection*, with a focus on processions. Whether carrying gods or royals in ceremonial

and military processions, elephants helped visually reinforce messages of power and nobility to devoted worshippers, loyal subjects, and hostile enemies.

This is especially true in a painting produced in northern India almost two centuries ago, featuring the ancient Vedic deity Indra on his elephant mount Airavata. Indra appears to be leading the *devas*—benevolent gods represented by the haloed figures in the distance—into battle. Recognized in varied forms by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, Indra is associated with war, the heavens, storms, and rain. Here he is shown wielding his thunderbolt weapon, or *Vajra*, in his right hand. Airavata is identifiable by his characteristic spotless white skin and multiple trunks and tusks.

The image is believed to illustrate a story from the *Bhagavata Purana*, a thousand-year-old sacred text chronicling the lives of the Hindu deity Vishnu, his avatars, and his devotees. Although both Indra and Airavata feature in numerous religious texts, several chapters of the Hindu text cover the conflict between Indra and the demon-god Vritrasura, whom Indra ultimately defeats, so it is possible this scene depicts the procession into battle against Vritrasura. As both ruler of the gods and rainmaker in Hinduism, Indra was a natural model for kingship in South and Southeast Asia. Elephants, too, symbolized royalty as auspicious creatures associated with rain and life-giving waters. Visual ties to Indra and Airavata, the most esteemed of all elephants, could therefore be interpreted as divine sanction of an earthly king's rule, recognizing the king as the "rainmaker" who would ensure the welfare and prosperity of his empire through just rule.

Some trivia: Capable of traveling long distances and intimidating foes with their size, strength, and numbers, war elephants formed one of the divisions of the Indian Army, embodying the king's prowess in world conquest. The 14th-century Indo-Persian poet Amir Khusraw Dihlavi described the rank of elephants in battle as a "line of baneful clouds, each cloud with lightning to attack, swift like the wind, in its swift motion each elephant like a splendid mountain, the armor upon it like the cloud upon a mountain."

Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

