

Tibetan Sacred Art

The mindscape revealed by ancient Tibetan sacred art has a profound impact on Westerners living in the modern world saturated with imagery and special effects. How much more extraordinary must the worlds of meditation experience have been for Asian people in the past living solely among the natural world when, during initiation ceremonies, the domains portrayed in Buddhist iconography were visionary experience of Buddhism's greatest masters: pure and vibrant insights expressing the eternal story of mind.

The imagery found in Tibetan art serves primarily as a series of visualizations which the meditator has the task of conjuring. The result, for the experienced practitioner, is enjoyment of a world of the psyche which is more vividly real than any reality could ever be. The art also has another function. It serves as a source of Buddhist teachings, portraying life stories, historical events, and so on. In Tibetan art, the message is more important than the medium. It attained a sumptuous finesse. Tibetan art bears some parallel with early classical art since both are a formal expression of classical religious notions and a statement of artistic inspiration. Buddhist artists carry out, on behalf of the community, the task of re-channelling the creative impulse, steering it from gratification and into an mindful offering to enlightenment. In Buddhist art, and even in the home, the greatest wealth is not in material possessions.

found in the shrine room or temple, and it was found in the shrine room or temple, and invest a sizeable portion of its wealth in adding one more statue, thangka or toto the family shrine, for the benefit of future generations to the family shrine, for the benefit of future generations. Sponsorship of religious artefacts led to thriving artistic and craft activity.

The History of the Medium

Tibetan art reflects that land's history and geography. Tibetan art reflects that land's history and geography. Situated south of a large stretch of the Silk Route, south of a large stretch of the Silk Route, varied cultures surrounding it. It had absorbed and lost, on the civilised oasis states to its north. Of these, Kucha was responsible for the later spread to Japan. Khotan was responsible for the later spread to the east, Nepal (to the immediate south), India (further south), Kashmir and Garbathe south-west) and Persia (to the west). As one of these neighbouring states tended to reflect their influence on Eastern Tibet, showing the attention to detail and depth of Eastern Tibetan heritage. Western Tibet, in contrast, picked up the softer heritage. Western Tibet, in contrast, picked up the softer heritage. Gupta and Pala dynasties through neighbouring Kashmir.

Gupta images of the Buddha used clearly defined lines and refined robes seeming almost diaphanous, as Pala images of the Buddha used more rounded forms and less defined lines.

The main vestiges of Pala sculpture were those found in the remains of Nalanda. The

only surviving documents of the Pala school in the two palm-leaf manuscripts in the University, one dating from the beginning and the other from the middle, containing, in all, 51 miniatures from the life of Buddha, evidently replicas of themselves, these artistic fashions lived on in Tibet long after they had disappeared from their native lands. In considering these influences, of the Tibetan plateau, larger of the Tibetan plateau, larger than Europe, travel makes its physical distances many factors greater than they seem on a map.

in Indian art and elements of a tradition known as *Chenluk*, which had many aspects of contemporary Chinese treatment of depth and great finesse. The New Min Central Tibet and is now known as the Central style (*U-ri*). Meanwhile, in Tibet, the *Gadri* style was further developed within the Karma Kagyu tradition, as *Karma Gadri*, under the inspiration of the great Kagyu guru the eighth founder of Palpung monastery. In it, one finds finely painted trees, rocks and cliffs reminiscent of Chinese landscape painting, flowers and assorted echos of natural beauty.

These various styles were expressed in two forms of pictorial paintings in temples and as portable painted scrolls. These precious substances such as lapis lazuli, turquoise and vermillion, these notable for the intensity of the pigments used. One might expect which is a land of extraordinary lights and colours, with skies that take rarely found elsewhere. In making a thangka, the pigments were applied on cotton support using rabbit skin glue, thus allowing them to be used over and over again as a transportable teaching tool.

The spiritual value of a thangka was more important to Tibetans. No matter how fine the artist, a thangka was consecrated by a notable lama, usually by the latter writing *HUN* and *HUNG* on the back of the thangka, in places corresponding

forehead, forehead, throat and heart of the aspect of Buddha portrayed
value was little cared for. Once a thangka became worn or faded, it was disposed
often by being buried in an unfrequented and pure place, there often by being buried
pigments to the earth from which they came.

More than murals escaped the ravages of the Cultural Revolution, through
which the art treasures of almost ten thousand were destroyed. At present though,
that did manage to survive the Cultural Revolution that did manage to survive the Cultural Revolution
antique market. Unscrupulous dealers visit Tibet as tourists and take note of
and their locations. Afterwards, through a network of South-East Asian traffickers, a
local Tibetan is bribed to steal the object and pass it through a chain of persons until
reaches the Western art market, where it has already been sold to private collectors
sometimes through the Internet. It is estimated, at the time of writing,
of Tibet's remaining art treasures have been lost in this way.

One such statue stolen was an extremely rare eighth century One such statue stolen was an extremely
to have come from the time of Guru Rinpoche. Seeing Tibet as being shaped like
prostrate body of a demoness, he had established Tara temples, with the
key points on her anatomy so as to subdue her. key points on her anatomy so as to subdue
tracked down and returned by Dr. tracked down and returned by Dr.
involved with humanitarian work on the Tibetan plateau. Thousands involved
the route to welcome it home, such is their belief in the
such had been their sadness at its initial loss.

Tibetan temples are traditionally dark, smoke-blackened places. Their walls are covered in colourful artwork. This was not so much an aesthetic choice as a practical one. In the high-altitude Tibetan climate, temples had to have thick walls and few small windows. The contrast, when one leaves the vast, luminous Tibetan landscape to enter the cavernous temples, is very striking. The difference between the mind exteriorised, through meditation.

At the time of its construction, the temple itself is located and set out according to guidelines which respect the *sapchay*, which is the Tibetan equivalent of Feng Shui. However, the first respects the classical rules whereas the second subjugates these rules to a higher priority: that of the insight of great masters. Thus temples are often high on cliff faces, like eagle nests, in spots which no run-of-the-mill temple would ever choose. Ideally a temple complex should be aligned on true east-west axes, with protecting hills to the north and west and with open space to the south and east, with distant, jewel-shaped hills in the latter direction.

The temple roof indicates its status in the area. More ornate roofs and probably indicate the presence and probably indicate the presence of a pagoda. Pagoda roofs take the form of *makara*, a mythical animal which is one part dragon, immensely powerful and able to travel through space. The *makara* is chained to the temple, indicating restraint of worldly

impulse and its sublimation into higher spiritual pursuits. Another distinctive feature is the Wheel of Dharma, supported by two, recalling the Enlightened One's first teaching, given in the Deer Forest near Benares. Internally, the temple is, for Tibetans, first and foremost a place where the Dharma can be properly stored and honoured. They call it a *lhakang* – House of the Dharma. It makes an ideal place for contemplative prayer. More intense meditation is usually carried out in private quarters or retreat centres. The centrepiece of the shrine is the Buddha image, fifteen metres, traversing several storeys of the edifice. Usually heavily gilded, the Buddha statue portrayed several of the thirty-two unique features of the Teacher's physical presence, such as the long, almond-shaped, blue eyes, the head mound and so forth. Many temples have smaller Buddha images, representing the one predicted to come to our world to teach.

The second important feature of the temple are the shelves, each scripture has its place, individually wrapped in brocade name flap for identification. Larger temples would have the original canon and probably the two hundred (shastra) on the content of this canon, as well as the lineage. Before these representations, offerings of many sorts, some as simple as water and butter and flour sculptures (*torma*) symbolising the psycho-spiritual components of life.

