

PREFACE



ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITA DI BOLOGNA
ISTITUTO DI STUDI SUPERIORI



**MULTICULTURAL STUDIES
IN ART AND AESTHETICS
IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION**

Italy/Japan Research Workshops

Monday 26 - Tuesday 27 March 2012



March 26 Academy of Sciences, Via Zamboni 31
March 27 Department of Oriental Studies, Via Zamboni 33
BOLOGNA



ACCADEMIA DELLE SCIENZE
DELL'ISTITUTO DI BOLOGNA

TRADITION AND INNOVATION. WESTERN INFLUENCES IN THE ARTISTIC PRODUCTION OF THE NEPALI PAINTER MUKTI SINGH THAPA.

Chiara Bellini
University of Bologna

It is only relatively recently that galleries and museums have begun showing an enthusiastic interest in the work of contemporary Tibetan artists¹. Two years ago, the Rubin Museum of New York has devoted a large exhibition, entitled *Tradition Transformed. Tibetan Artists Respond*², to a number of these. The recent upsurge in Tibetan art is known in the West largely thanks to the efforts of the Rossi & Rossi Gallery of London³, which a few years ago began to exhibit works by modern Tibetan artists. The first Italian exhibition of this kind, *Tibetan Visions. Contemporary Painting from Tibet*, was organised in Rome by Asia Onlus in 2009⁴, and on 4 November 2009, Renzo Freschi's Oriental Art Gallery inaugurated the exhibition *Past and Present of Tibetan Painting*⁵. These are brave and admirable initiatives, reflecting a new trend in the tastes of the public and collectors alike, who have generally been keener on traditional ancient Buddhist art.

Looking at the situation as a whole, contemporary traditional Buddhist and Hindu art⁶ finds it hard to fit into what is an evident gap between traditional sacred art and contemporary works, often built around a secular theme. This gap seems to suggest that Tibeto-Himalayan art can be split in two along cultural and religious lines. In fact, reflecting as it does continuing and fervent religious feeling, traditional Buddhist art has never ceased being produced; indeed, the past few years have witnessed an increase in demand for sacred art⁷ throughout Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Ladakh and others parts of India. The interest of art historians and Western collectors in traditional Tibetan art created in the twentieth and twenty-first century has been limited to a handful of examples. This attitude reflects a typically Western way of assessing an object based on its age or its aesthetic value, without taking into account its purpose within a cultural context⁸.

These works were actually made not to satisfy aesthetic requirements, but to act as instruments conducive to effective meditation or as accessories in liturgical practices. In order to fulfil their function, the images have to correspond to the descriptions in the texts, while observing the iconometric and iconographic rules establishing their orthodoxy. It follows that the fundamental premise that needs to be borne in mind in any discussion of traditional Buddhist art is its specific function and the artists' intentions in producing it. In other words, it is important to approach the Tibeto-Himalayan artistic sensibility from the point of view of those who made use of and commissioned it.

A recurring feature of Himalayan art has been its tendency to look to the past. Artists have always considered the art of their predecessors a source of inspiration, and this is why over the centuries works have been produced which deliberately imitated the style characteristic of previous periods. Until the twentieth century, Tibetan, Nepalese and Ladakhi art was almost exclusively sacred, except for rugs or objects in everyday use, such as furniture and tools, which are often exquisitely made. Artists thus concentrated their attention on sacred images created as aids to meditation or for educational or doctrinal purposes, or simply to acquire spiritual merits. This function inevitably puts the figure of the artist himself into the background in a cultural environment that was not very dissimilar to that found in pre-Renaissance Europe, when the divine began to be subordinated to man and the figure of the artist himself. This inevitably has meant that little is known of the individual sculptors and painters, although the names of a few artists who over the centuries worked for nobles, abbots and rulers have come down to us. One of these is Anige (1245-1306), a Nepalese artist active until the early fourteenth century at the court of the Mongol Yuan dynasty, whose artistic development and personal life were described by the Chinese historian Cheng Jufu (1249-1318). But aside from exceptional examples like this, artists have generally been forgotten, remaining in a sort of limbo. Some Tibetologists, such as David Jackson and Erberto Lo Bue have concerned themselves with these questions, the latter recording the work of Newar sculptors in the Nepal Valley and some painters and sculptors in Ladakh.

Like their Byzantine and pre-Renaissance Romanesque counterparts, Tibetan artists were solely interested in transmitting their sacred symbolic messages, which remained basically unchanged. Over the centuries, sacred images have undergone changes in style reflecting cultural modifications and the vagaries of taste, but the underlying symbolism always remained true to itself. Another reason the tradition has survived intact is thanks to the artists themselves, who have abided by the iconometric and iconographic rules and respected age-old painting techniques. They have in turn been helped by patrons who still turn to the skills of these artists to obtain images appropriate for use in religious worship. All this has never changed and the relationship between patron and artist has remained absolutely crucial down to the present day. This has reinforced the continuity between the past and the present and ensured that there are no differences in value in terms of use and worship between ancient and contemporary art. For a Buddhist, an image made in the twentieth century is just as effective as one produced in the eleventh. The process of commissioning a work and painting it has remained unchanged over time. The importance of a religious image is determined by what it represents and by the relevance of the iconographic and iconometric rules, not necessary by its age. Images of deities and mandalas lose their meaning when not buttressed by the religious tradition to which they



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

belong, since their value, after all, does not derive from their appearance, however beautiful and refined, but from their role in religious theory and practice.

One of the most interesting contemporary artists working in the sacred art tradition is Mukhti Singh Thapa, a highly skilled Nepalese artist who lives and works in Lalitpur, in the Nepal Valley. Thapa produces not only traditional religious image that are commissioned to him by devotees, but also images that are the product of his own religious feelings and do not conform necessarily with traditional iconography and iconometry. His talent and background make him an eclectic and original artist, who, while respecting the demands of orthodoxy, manages nonetheless to communicate something absolutely personal in his works. Ethnically a Magar, Thapa was born in 1957 in Bandipur, a town nestling among the hills in the Nepal Valley. He moved to Kathmandu in the seventies to work and to study painting and iconography, captivated as he was by the Indo-Newari style that was fashionable in Tibet until the fifteenth century. Thapa paints mainly⁹ *thang ka*, a term denoting any sacred image painted on a scroll of paper or cloth. This art has come down to us through an ancient oral tradition handed down from master to pupil over the generations and is based on established canons. It requires lengthy technical training and a thorough grounding in Buddhist doctrine and philosophy, ensuring a proper understanding of the images' meaning.

Painting one of these works entails a long preliminary phase consisting of preparing the canvas and colours, followed by the drawing, executed on an iconometric grid outlined in pencil or charcoal beforehand. The colours, prepared from natural pigments mixed with egg yolk and glue and ground by Thapa himself in a mortar, are then laid on the drawing. This is a long process, demanding no little skill and considerable experience. Thapa is a complete artist, in that his mastery of the preparatory phase is no less conspicuous than his expertise in applying the colours and shading. In order to give a greater sense of volume to his images, the flat colour fields are treated with the *sfumato* technique, which differs from *chiaroscuro* in that it is not intended to mimic the play of light in a realistic manner, but is based on a concept typical of all Indian, not just Tibetan, art¹⁰. The effect of this technique can be seen in a *thang ka* portraying Mahakala (Fig. 1), executed in 2006. Note the use of natural pigments, such as lapislazuli and malachite, and Thapa's skill in creating a shading effect while lending the image a sense of "refulgence".

Thapa included his work in an exhibition of work by Nepalese artists for the first time in a show organised by N.A.F.A. (Nepal Association of Fine Arts) in 1977, with a mandala depicting



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Vajrabhairava in the Newar style, based on a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century original. Making a mandala (Fig. 2) requires great technical ability and a profound understanding of the iconography involved, and Thapa's success with exhibition visitors showed that he possesses these in abundance. The panel specially set up to judge the works included Siddhi Muni Sakya (born in 1932), perhaps the greatest Newar painter in the Nepal Valley. In

an interview discussing the painting of a similar subject¹¹, Thapa said he wanted to lend his image a sense of movement and continuity, so that the viewer's eye could take in the mandala as a whole and not piecemeal, pausing over individual sections. According to Thapa, this all-encompassing view is meant to be an aid in concentrating during meditation. This is why his figures are set in a harmonious relationship to one another, so the eye is drawn smoothly towards the centre, where the deity resides. The traditional artist therefore does not confine himself to copying, but is always mindful of the purposes for which the work is being painted, reflecting on the possible variations that might improve its effectiveness without altering its symbolic impact and jeopardising its orthodoxy. Similar considerations concern the iconometric

drawing, which according to the artist requires a degree of interpretation, otherwise the image will appear static and stiff once it is finished. Moreover, Thapa takes care to make the faces of his figures extremely expressive and never stereotyped. They always appear charged with emotional power (Fig. 3). His work represents an evolution of the traditional form, which in this way is renewed while retaining its deepest meaning. A recurring characteristic of Mukti Singh Thapa's art are his elaborate backgrounds and minutely detailed decorative motifs. The exhibition "Contemporary Tibetan Art: from the Collection of Shelley & Donald Rubin", held in Oglethorpe University Art Museum, Atlanta, displayed a painting of Vairocana by Thapa. The background is made up of a mass of worshippers in adoration, just as in another *thang ka* depicting Maitreya (Fig. 4). The notes accompanying the painting raised doubts about its iconographic orthodoxy, stating that "filling the space around the figure of Vairocana with small heads of no iconographic significance [...], Thapa has created a painting which has a mainly decorative function. It is gracefully painted but is of no specific ritual use"¹². Lo Bue has taken issue with this view, confirming the work's suitability in a religious context and explaining that "the decision to assign a ritual purpose to a religious image is the prerogative of the lama who consecrates it, and not of art historians"¹³. Similar examples of worshippers in adoration or at prayer can be seen in the wall paintings of Ajanta dating from the second half of the fifth



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

century, in the eleventh-century works in Shalu, or in those in the caves of Saspola in Ladakh, which date from the fifteenth century, where devotees depicted in the same manner surround the figure of Tsongkhapa.

It should not be forgotten that the images of the Buddha and deities are conceived as painted transpositions of visions described by enlightened masters and may thus display a certain degree of variability from an iconographic point of view. Mukti Singh Thapa remains faithful to the Buddhist spirit even when he seems to introduce iconographic and iconometric modifications, which however do not go against tradition or nullify the work's symbolic meaning. Art historians and collectors should also acknowledge and accept the legitimacy of artistic innovations linked to new concepts and the fact that traditional art has itself evolved, as these have always occurred. This is how new ideas, styles and techniques are introduced and is exactly what happened for instance in the early centuries of Buddhist art in the Gandharan region, where a certain sensibility tinged with Graeco-Roman influences did not condition only the style of the art, but also the philosophical ideas and religious doctrines that underpinned them.

As already mentioned, Mukti's style is distinctive even in the decorative motifs with which he enjoys embellishing the robes of the figures he portrays (Fig. 5). As a child, he would draw ornamental details which the woman of his village then embroidered on textiles. Other drawings he sold, earning from fifteen paisa to one rupee a time and thus helping provide for his family. Although of secondary importance, the vegetal and animal motifs present in his paintings are also worth noting, since the artist himself appears especially fond of them (Fig. 6). These and other features throw light on his past and on his childhood in particular, which he recalls with affection. In these rustic scenes memories of Mukti's old schoolmaster Krisna Sresta take physical shape. Thapa has fond memories of Sresta, who used to take Thapa and a few other pupils to sketch in the fields after school and would spend the little money he could save from his salary on paint and pencils for the children of the village, encouraging them in their artistic endeavours. It was painting from life en plein air that Thapa learned his skill in rendering plants, flowers, insects and small animals, subjects which are still scattered throughout his works and which act as a framework for his sacred paintings, even while strictly observing the rules of composition.

Thapa's work is now beginning to explore fresh conceptual territory beyond the confines of traditional art, where it comes into contact with modern art (Fig. 7-8). This inclination reflects



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

the changes that are starting to make themselves felt in the social and cultural fields, partly due to the influx of typically Western influences and concerns. In addition to traditional paintings, which serve a strictly functional purpose, Thapa also paints works that germinate in his own imagination and do not obey any iconographic or chromatic rules, even though they may exploit some aspects of Buddhist and Hindu symbolism¹⁴. This is an evocative art, linked to his inspiration and his own personal vision of the world. In a work which I shall conventionally entitle “The Creation” (Fig. 9), Thapa depicts a sort of large Tree of Life, surrounded by pairs of human beings from different parts of the planet – a feature clearly influenced by the painting of Arcimboldo. In the foreground are portrayed representatives of four religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam (Fig. 10). Each figure is accompanied by an attendant holding the chief symbol of his respective religion. The artist explores not only the concept of creation, but the very meaning and role of religion in the modern world. By bringing together these four great religions, Thapa attributes to each the same value and the same ends. Birds, fish and animals of all kinds add a further interest to the painting: once again the themes which are dearest to Thapa and which more than any other take him back to his childhood and the most carefree time in his life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- C. Bellini, “Tradition or Innovation? Orientation in Tibetan Traditional and Modern Art”, in R. Freschi (ed.) *Past and Present of Tibetan Painting*, Catalogue no 25, Milan 2010, pp. 10-15.
- C. Bellini, “Bönpo and Buddhist Art in 20th-century Lo”, in E. Lo Bue (ed.), *Mustang: The Artistic Heritage of an Ancient Himalayan Kingdom*, Marg Publications, Mumbai 2010, pp.
- J. Baudrillard, *Il sistema degli oggetti*, Bompiani, Milano 2003.
- J. Ciliberto, “Contemporary Tibetan Art: From the Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin”, *Buddhist Art News*, 16.02.09, <http://www.buddhistartnews.com/ban07/?p=3119#more-3119>
- M. Delahoutre, *Lo spirito dell'arte Indiana*, Jaca Book, Milan 1994.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

D. Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna 1996.

D. & J. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting*.

Method and Materials, Snow Lion, New York 2006.

E. Lo Bue, "Tibetan Aesthetics versus Western Aesthetics in the Appreciation of Religious Art" in M. Esposito (ed.), *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 2, École Française d'Extrême-Orient, Paris 2008, pp. 687-704.

Lo Bue, Erberto, *A Short Biography of a Contemporary Buddhist Painter*, in Monisha Ahmed & Clare Harris (ed.) *Ladakh. Culture at the Crossroads*, special edition of "Marg", 57/1 (September 2005), Marg Publications, Mumbai 2005, pp. 94-103.

Lo Bue, Erberto, *Lives and Works of Traditional Buddhist Artists in 20th Century Ladakh. A Preliminary Account*, in John Bray (ed.), *Ladakhi Histories. Local and Regional Perspectives*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2005, pp. 353-378.

Lo Bue, Erberto, *Traditional Buddhist Art in 20th Century Ladakh*, in John Bray and Ngawang Tsering Shakspo (ed.), *Recent Research on Ladakh 2007*, J & K Academy for Art Culture & Languages – International Association for Ladakh Studies, Leh 2007, pp. 89-98.

E. Lo Bue, "La pittura religiosa contemporanea nel Tibet geo-culturale" in *Le arti tibetane in transizione. Un viaggio attraverso teatro, cinema e pittura*, proceedings of Rome and Naples seminars 2008-2009, Asia Onlus and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome 2009, pp. 99-106.

I. Alsop, "Contemporary Art in Lhasa", in *Orientalism*, vol. 38, no 5, (June 2007), pp. 59-65.

C. Harris, "Towards a definition of Contemporary Painting Style", in J. Casey Singer, Ph. Denwood (ed.), *Tibetan Art. Towards a definition of style*, London 1997, pp. 262-270.

C. Harris, *In the Image of Tibet. Tibetan Painting after 1959*, Reaktion Book Ltd, London 1999.

K. Mansingh Heimsath, "Untitled Identities. Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet", www.asianart.com 2005, (March 2010).

L. Miller Sangster, "Meeting old Buddhas in New Clothes", in A. Rossi and F. Rossi (ed.), *Tibetan encounters Contemporary meets Tradition*, Annamaria Rossi & Fabio Rossi Publications, London 2007, pp. 5-11.

E. W. Ng (ed.), *Tradition Transformed. Tibetan Artists Respond*, Artasiapacific, Rubin Museum of Art, New York 2010.

Notes:

- ¹ The terms “Tibet” and “Tibetan” are used in a geo-cultural sense, thus covering other countries and regions with a Buddhist culture, such as Ladakh, Nepal, Mustang and Bhutan.
- ² The exhibition was held in the Rubin Museum of Art, New York, opening on 11 June 2009 and closing on 18 October 2010.
- ³ The gallery has held several exhibitions by contemporary Tibetan artists, including for instance “Tibetan Encounters. Contemporary Meets Tradition”, from 19 to 27 March 2007.
- ⁴ The exhibition was organised by Asia ONLUS together with Galleria Alessandra Bonomo, Centro di Studi sul Buddhismo in Naples University and La Sapienza University, Rome, and co-financed by the Italian Foreign Ministry, and ran from 13 February to 3 March 2009.
- ⁵ The exhibition was inaugurated at the Oriental Art Gallery, via del Gesù 17, Milan, on 4 November 2010.
- ⁶ On this rather neglected topic see, for example, E. Lo Bue’s articles in bibliography.
- ⁷ E. Lo Bue has devoted a number of articles to this subject, few of which are reported in the bibliography.
- ⁸ Cf. E. Lo Bue, “Tibetan Aesthetics versus Western Aesthetics in the Appreciation of Religious Art”, in M. Esposito (ed.), *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 2, École Française d’Extrême-Orient, Paris 2008, pp. 687-704.
- ⁹ He has recently taken part in an important project restoring the temple of Maitreya at Mönthang, Mustang, where he painted the missing sections of certain damaged wall paintings.
- ¹⁰ In Indian and Himalayan painting volume is suggested by variations in tone which are intended to reinforce form, but no light source is ever present to lend depth to an image. Not because artists are unable to paint realistically, but because according to the Indian concept of art, deities emit light, they do not receive it. See M. Delahoutre, “Lo spirito dell’arte indiana”, Jaca Book, Milan 1994, p. 55.
- ¹¹ In conversation with myself in September 2008.
- ¹² J. Ciliberto, “Contemporary Tibetan Art: From the Collection of Shelley and Donald Rubin”, *Buddhist Art News*, 16.02.09, <http://www.buddhistartnews.com/ban07/?p=3119#more-3119>, p.5.
- ¹³ E. Lo Bue, “La pittura religiosa contemporanea nel Tibet geo-culturale” in *Le arti tibetane in transizione. Un viaggio attraverso teatro, cinema e pittura, atti dei seminari Roma e Napoli 2008-2009*, Asia Onlus and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rome 2009, p. 100.
- ¹⁴ Thapa has created a series of black and white *thang ka*, painted using traditional techniques and materials. The subjects, makara, yakshi, chimeras and harpies, are extrapolated from a traditional context, such as the decorative pillars of the entrance portals of the temples, and appear on the canvases as the main subjects, taking on the role of protagonists.