



WONDERS OF LO

The Artistic Heritage
of Mustang



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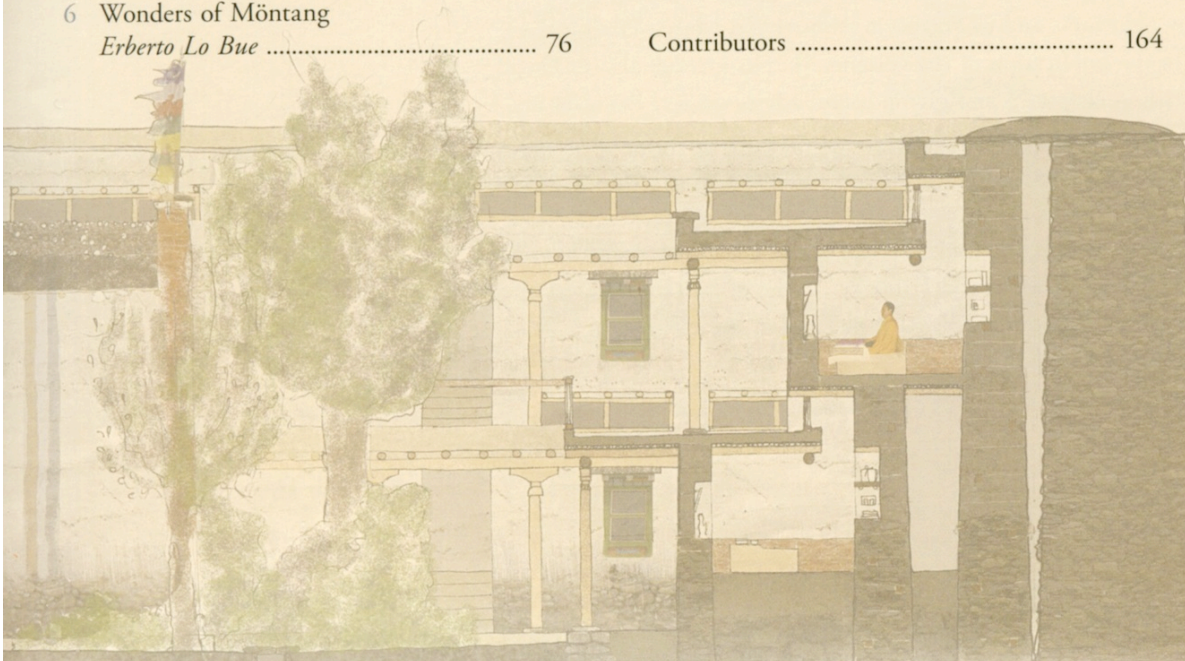
The Artistic Heritage
of Mustang

edited by Erberto Lo Bue



CONTENTS

Preface	8	7 Portable Buddhist Sculptures of Lo: A Chronological Selection, 15th through 17th Centuries <i>Amy Heller</i>	90	
1 An Introduction to the Cultural History of Lo (Mustang) <i>Erberto Lo Bue</i>	10	RESTORATION AND REVIVAL		
ARCHITECTURE		8 The Restoration of Murals in the Maitreya Temple of Möntang <i>Luigi Fieni</i>	108	
2 A Tibetan Architecture? The Traditional Buildings of Lo <i>John Harrison</i>	26	9 The Restoration of Murals in the Mahamuni Temple of Möntang <i>Luigi Fieni</i>	122	
PAINTING AND SCULPTURE		10 Bönpo and Buddhist Art in 20th-century Lo <i>Chiara Bellini</i>	134	
3 Cave Hermitages and Chapels in Eastern Lo <i>Erberto Lo Bue</i>	40	11 Reviving a Sacred Place: The Hermitage of Samdrupling <i>Maie Kitamura</i>	148	
4 Early Cave Paintings Rediscovered in Upper Lo <i>Luigi Fieni</i>	56	List of Phonetic Transcriptions and Equivalent Transliterations of Tibetan Words		160
5 Early Wall Paintings in Lo: Luri Reconsidered <i>Helmut F. Neumann and Heidi A. Neumann</i>	64	Index		162
6 Wonders of Möntang <i>Erberto Lo Bue</i>	76	Contributors		164

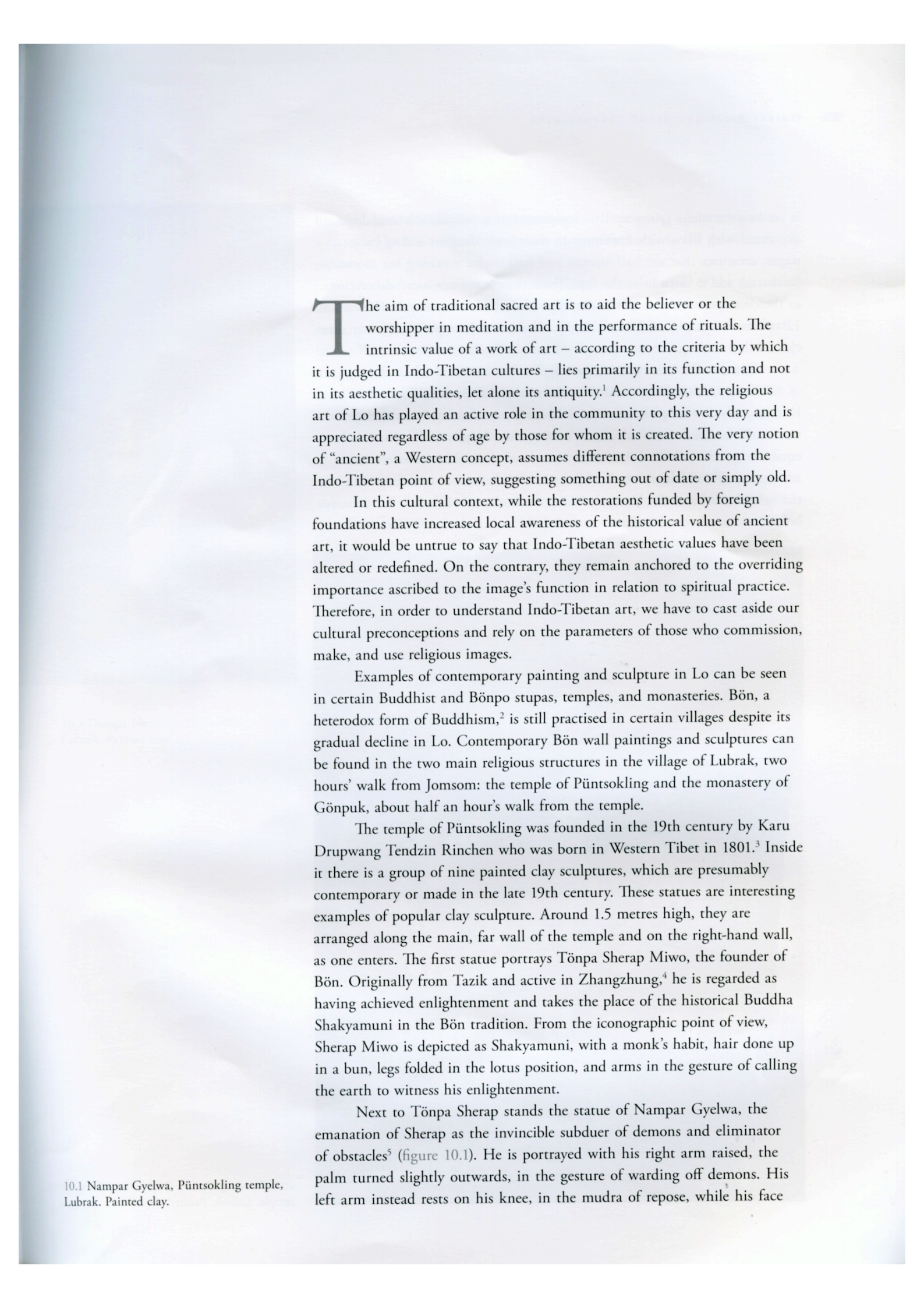


CHAPTER 10

Bönpo and Buddhist Art in 20th-century Lo

Chiara Bellini





The aim of traditional sacred art is to aid the believer or the worshipper in meditation and in the performance of rituals. The intrinsic value of a work of art – according to the criteria by which it is judged in Indo-Tibetan cultures – lies primarily in its function and not in its aesthetic qualities, let alone its antiquity.¹ Accordingly, the religious art of Lo has played an active role in the community to this very day and is appreciated regardless of age by those for whom it is created. The very notion of “ancient”, a Western concept, assumes different connotations from the Indo-Tibetan point of view, suggesting something out of date or simply old.

In this cultural context, while the restorations funded by foreign foundations have increased local awareness of the historical value of ancient art, it would be untrue to say that Indo-Tibetan aesthetic values have been altered or redefined. On the contrary, they remain anchored to the overriding importance ascribed to the image’s function in relation to spiritual practice. Therefore, in order to understand Indo-Tibetan art, we have to cast aside our cultural preconceptions and rely on the parameters of those who commission, make, and use religious images.

Examples of contemporary painting and sculpture in Lo can be seen in certain Buddhist and Bönpo stupas, temples, and monasteries. Bön, a heterodox form of Buddhism,² is still practised in certain villages despite its gradual decline in Lo. Contemporary Bön wall paintings and sculptures can be found in the two main religious structures in the village of Lubrak, two hours’ walk from Jomsom: the temple of Püntsockling and the monastery of Gönpuk, about half an hour’s walk from the temple.

The temple of Püntsockling was founded in the 19th century by Karu Drupwang Tendzin Rinchen who was born in Western Tibet in 1801.³ Inside it there is a group of nine painted clay sculptures, which are presumably contemporary or made in the late 19th century. These statues are interesting examples of popular clay sculpture. Around 1.5 metres high, they are arranged along the main, far wall of the temple and on the right-hand wall, as one enters. The first statue portrays Tönpa Sherap Miwo, the founder of Bön. Originally from Tazik and active in Zhangzhung,⁴ he is regarded as having achieved enlightenment and takes the place of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni in the Bön tradition. From the iconographic point of view, Sherap Miwo is depicted as Shakyamuni, with a monk’s habit, hair done up in a bun, legs folded in the lotus position, and arms in the gesture of calling the earth to witness his enlightenment.

Next to Tönpa Sherap stands the statue of Nampar Gyelwa, the emanation of Sherap as the invincible subduer of demons and eliminator of obstacles⁵ (figure 10.1). He is portrayed with his right arm raised, the palm turned slightly outwards, in the gesture of warding off demons. His left arm instead rests on his knee, in the mudra of repose, while his face

is set in a ferocious grimace. This sculpture has a considerable mandorla, decorated with lions with brahmins in their jaws, dragons eating baby nagas, creatures that are half-human and half-snake, writhing sea monsters (makaras) and a Garuda at the top. These details are not mere decorations, as the description of this particular type of mandorla in chapter five of the 12-volume biography of Tönpa Sherap, devoted to Nampar Gyelwa, makes clear.

Next to the statue of Nampar Gyelwa is a beautiful white clay figure of Künzang Gyelwa Düpa, seated in the meditation posture (figure 10.2). Künzang Gyelwa Düpa has five faces bearing peaceful expressions, and ten arms, the first two of which are held at chest height in the gesture of equanimity. The palms of the hands are turned towards the observer and are decorated with the symbols of the sun and the moon, inscribed with the syllables “A” and “MA”, symbolizing method and wisdom.⁶ The divinity holds a victory banner, a swastika, and the wheel of the law in three of



10.2 Künzang Gyelwa Düpa, Püntsokling temple, Lubrak. Painted clay.



10.3 Drenpa Namkha, Püntsoqing temple, Lubrak. Painted clay.

his right hands, while the corresponding left three grasp a bow and arrow, a lasso, and a hook. Two other hands rest on his knees in the gesture of repose.

A third sculpture represents the tantric manifestation of the master Drenpa Namkha regarded as a form of divinity, in sexual union with his mate, the dakini Öden Barma (figure 10.3). This figure is well known both in the Bön as well as in the Buddhist Nyingmapa and Kagyüpa traditions as the symbol of a non-sectarian religious outlook. Next to Drenpa Namkha is a portrait of Nyammé Sherap Gyeltsen (1356–1415), from Eastern Tibet, who was responsible for structuring the Bönpo monastic order and was the founder in 1405 of the monastery of Menri, in Central Tibet.⁷ This monastery was a leading light in the spiritual, monastic, and liturgical life of the Bönpo religion until the Cultural Revolution forced its thirty-second abbot to flee to India. The monastery was completely demolished and later rebuilt in 1984. By then, a new Menri monastery had been erected in 1969 in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India, reacquiring its ancient status as a model for all Bönpo communities under its thirty-third abbot.

On the right-hand wall can be seen the image of Lubrakpa, identifiable from the inscription painted on the lotus petal throne on which the figure is seated in meditation. Lubrakpa is the epithet used to refer to Trashi Gyeltsen, a Bönpo master who lived in the 13th century and to whom the above-mentioned monastery of Gönpuk is dedicated.⁸ The story of Trashi Gyeltsen, also known as the “Protector of Living Beings” is painted on the east wall of the temple. According to tradition, Lubrakpa withdrew into the cave to meditate for nine years, nine months, and nine days and this temple was subsequently built over the site. After repeated restoration and a final collapse, the temple was re-erected in modern times thanks to funding from the Danish Embassy in Kathmandu. In 2002 the temple was decorated with a cycle of paintings by the Nepalese artist Aku Gochen, from the Helambu area of Nepal, who lives in Bodhnath, east of Kathmandu.

The Gönpuk cycle of paintings depicts certain divinities in the Bönpo pantheon together with the painted narrative of the temple founder’s life. Of particular interest in the first group of figures, depicted on the southern wall, is the representation of the red Apsé Dungmar, holding a victory banner in one hand and an owl in the other (figure 10.4). In this case, Apsé’s hair, normally hidden by a helmet, is shown blown about by the swirling wind that spirals round the flames surrounding the figure. Sipè Gyelmo, the last figure on the wall, with her multiple limbs and attributes, is the Bönpo equivalent of Penden Lhamo, the Buddhist protectress of Tibet, whose iconography originates from that of the Hindu goddess Durga.

On the west wall are depicted four other figures. One of them, Jamma (“Loving Kindness”), is a female divinity coloured yellow, whose name is the feminine equivalent of Jampa, the Tibetan name for the Buddhist bodhisattva Maitreya. However, iconographically, this divinity has no connection with Maitreya, being much more closely related to the Buddhist divinity Tara. She is depicted with a third, vertical eye between her eyebrows



10.4 Apsé Dungmar, Gönpuk monastery, Lubrak. Distemper.

exactly like Tara and, like her, she is shown in her eight-fold form as the protectress against eight dangers. Here again, the Indian model for much Bönpo iconography is obvious. A large proportion of Bönpo doctrine, which, as David Snellgrove has argued, represents a heterodox form of Buddhism, is also certainly Indian in origin. Bönpo rituals, religious beliefs, and iconography are largely similar to those of Buddhism and they also have their roots in the Indian tradition.

The figure of Jamma is followed by three masters raised to the level of divinities, the most important one being Drenpa Namkha, who according to tradition was instrumental in the spread of Bön during the 8th century.

The north wall is partly covered by a stone altar and by the entrance to the cave where Trashi Gyeltsen meditated, and partly by three painted divinities: Tapiritsa, Künzang Gyelwa Düpa, and Zhangzhung Meri.

Tapiritsa is one of the most esoteric figures in the Bön pantheon and perhaps one of the most frequently represented. This master is portrayed shorn of clothing, jewellery, and attributes, sitting in the lotus position and making the gesture of meditation, surrounded by a round mandorla of rainbow rays. The rainbow also occurs as a symbol in Buddhism, but is more commonly found in Bön. Tapiritsa's chief characteristic is his human appearance, and as a result he is coloured pink and has no additional arms or legs. The straightforwardness typical of Tapiritsa is matched by the key concepts of the esoteric Dzokchen⁹ doctrine, of which the founder of the temple was a practitioner. Dzokchen regards the human condition as "perfect", a state in which nothing needs to be changed. At the heart of this doctrine lies the notion that every moment in life is to be lived trying to maintain one's natural state, *rikpa*, namely "knowledge", which is often obscured by ignorance or deflected by karmic influences. Under the image of Tapiritsa is painted the Tibetan letter "A" enclosed within

Opposite
10.5 Künzang Gyelwa Düpa and
Zhangzhung Meri, Gönpuk monastery,
Lubrak. Distemper.





10.6 Zhangzhung Meri, detail of figure 10.5, Gönpuk monastery, Lubrak. Distemper.

a multicoloured spherical drop, *tikle*, which in the Dzokchen tradition represents the primordial, pure human condition beyond dualistic concepts. Tapiritsa's hagiographies claim he achieved the so-called "rainbow body", the dissolution of the body into light of five different colours, corresponding to the five elements.

One aspect of Bön iconography, also ascribable to Indian origins, is the use of sacred syllables as the attributes of the various divinities. This applies not only to Tapiritsa, but also to Künzang Gyelwa Düpa (figure 10.5), who bears the syllables "A" and "MA" inscribed on the palms of his main hands, as was seen in his depiction in the previous temple. Next to Künzang Gyelwa Düpa is Meri, a ferocious divinity who embodies the "Fire Mountain of Shangshung" (figures 10.5 and 10.6). His image is shown in a dynamic posture, with all 18 arms and six legs in motion, and his precisely depicted hair blowing in the wind. A large mandorla of flames surrounds the image, lending the already terrifying, three-headed figure surmounted by six animal heads an even more ferocious mien.

In the middle of the temple's east wall is a large painting depicting the biography of Lubrakpa, namely Trashi Gyeltsen (figure 10.7). His life and deeds¹⁰ are crucially important in the history and spread of Bön in Lo. The cycle of paintings illustrates his human and spiritual biography. The scenes are accompanied by captions describing the images drawn.

The cycle opens with the representation of Trashi Gyeltsen's father, the "great" Yantön Sherap Gyeltsen (1077–1141?), who was from southwest Tibet. He was a member of the Yangal clan and travelled to Lo to seek the Bön master, Ronggom Tokmé Zhikpo, who lived in western Lo, from whom he learned the teachings of the "Dzokchen Oral Tradition of Shangshung",¹¹ becoming one of its chief promulgators. The following images illustrate the life of the young Trashi Gyeltsen, first with his wife, then with his three

children. It was only after the death of his beloved consort that Trashi Gyeltsen devoted himself totally to Bönpo, and he is portrayed as he receives instruction from the master Shentön Yeshé Lotrö.¹²

The scenes concerned with the famous conversion of a demon, Kyerang Drakmé (“Self-Generated Without Fear”), living in the mountains of Lubrak, are among the most beautiful and most curious of the narrative. The demon performs a series of evil actions against the Bönpo master, but is converted in the end, becoming a protector of the doctrine himself. The cycle also includes a depiction of the cave where “the master Trashi Gyeltsen performs the ‘Mountain of Fire’ ritual”, as can be read in the inscription.¹³ In memory of this time spent in isolation, the lama left his footprint in a rock that is still visible today at the entrance to the cave.

The final scene in the cycle depicts Trashi Gyeltsen’s spiritual fulfilment (see figure 1.5), the moment when his body is transformed into a rainbow.¹⁴

10.7 Episodes from Trashi Gyeltsen’s life, Gönpuk monastery, Lubrak. Distemper.





10.8 Lubrak Sungma Sinpo Kyerang,
Gönpuk monastery, Lubrak. Distemper.

Following the iconographic programme of the temple in the anti-clockwise direction, at the very end can be found the unusual image of Lubrak Sungma Sinpo Kyerang (figure 10.8). This is a local divinity, representing Kyerang Drakmé, the demon converted by Trashi Gyeltsen and turned into a protector of the doctrine, a notion incorporated in his very name, which means “at once the demon and protector of Lubrak”. This figure has two fierce faces, the main one wearing a helmet, the other having the same features as the face of Kyerang Drakmé depicted in the cycle portraying the life of Trashi Gyeltsen. Here, however, a boar’s head protruding from the demon’s hair is added.

One example of contemporary traditional Buddhist art is the cycle of paintings in the Sakyapa temple in Geling, south of Möntang. These paintings were made by Tulachan Shashi Dhoje, whose name appears in a long inscription in the entrance porch. Another name in the same inscription, Chögyel Tendzin, is perhaps the artist’s second name or one

Opposite
10.9 Gurgön, Geling temple. Distemper.



of his assistants'. The work was begun on May 18, 1991 and completed on October 2 the following year.

On the southeastern part of the wall, in which is set the entrance to the assembly hall, are gathered a number of protectors of the doctrine: Gurgön (figure 10.9), Penden Lhamo (figure 10.10), the four-headed Gönpo, and two other versions of Gurgön and Penden Lhamo. The last figure painted on the southwestern section of the wall is Künga Zangpo (1382–1456) whose importance for the renaissance of the faith in Lo has been discussed elsewhere in this book (see chapter 1).

The daylight filters into the assembly hall through a lantern set in the middle of the ceiling. The interior walls are painted, the southern section being decorated with pictures of the historical Buddha with his favourite disciples, the 16 sthavira, with their two attendants. The eastern side is decorated with a large picture of the Indian master Nagarjuna accompanied by a water sprite shown as she emerges daintily from the waves to proffer a text to the master. The artist's name (Tulachan Shashi Dhoje) can be made out next to the figure. The northern side depicts the great master Künga Nyingpo together with other masters from the Sakya lineage.

10.10 Penden Lhamo, Geling temple. Distemper.



A further example of contemporary Buddhist art in the kingdom of Lo is Tupten Sampel Ling, the Sakyapa monastery of Kagbeni (Kak). It was founded in 1429 by the master Tenpè Gyeltsen and contains a cycle of wall paintings commissioned by the present abbot of the monastery and executed towards the late 1970s by a Tamang artist living in Bodhnath. These paintings are not as fine as those described above, but are nonetheless of a certain interest from an iconographic and compositional point of view, as they reflect their patron's taste and reveal the monastery's financial circumstances. Lo used to be an economically and spiritually thriving kingdom, as demonstrated by the ancient paintings in the Lo Möntang temples, which were built and decorated using rare and precious materials, such as lapis lazuli and gold. By contrast, the finances of contemporary patrons have often proved unequal to the expense, and extra funds, even from abroad, have had to be sought to commission restorations or new artworks, as in the case of the Bönpo temple of Lubrak.

On the east wall, where the entrance to the temple is situated, stand the four guardian kings divided into pairs, along with Avalokiteshvara and a beautiful image of a White Tara (figure 10.11). Next to her, at the northern end of the wall, can be seen the representation of the "Parable of

10.11 White Tara and the "Parable of Collaboration", Tupten Sampel Ling, Kagbeni. Distemper.



Collaboration”, an ancient “edifying tale” in which an elephant, a monkey, a hare, and a bird join forces and use their separate skills to pick a fruit, eat it, scatter its seeds over the ground, and nurture them (figure 10.11).

The glass cases along the west wall house an important collection of metal sculptures from different periods arranged on shelves around two large images of Sakya masters (figure 10.12). Near the 81-centimetre-high sculpture of one of them is a copper image of Tara (see figure 10.12, lower right) cast by the lost-wax technique – its delicate facial features and sinuous lines making it a fine example of contemporary Newar sculpture. Newar sculptors from the Nepal Valley have always worked in Tibetan and Himalayan monasteries. New clients continue even today to follow the age-old tradition and commission their sculpture from these skilful artists. The complex techniques of modelling, casting, and carving have been handed down intact from father to son and from master to pupil over the centuries. The great contemporary Newar artists strictly follow the techniques inherited from their masters and keep to traditional iconographic and iconometric models. Some



10.12 Sakya master, Tupten Sampel Ling, Kagbeni. 81 cm.

perform their work as an integral part of their spiritual exercises, a sort of creative meditation requiring concentration and an awareness of one's every gesture.

In spite of the shortage of financial resources, the Lo monasteries continue to press ahead with their restoration, commissioning paintings and clay and metal sculptures from local craftsmen or artists of neighbouring areas. Private chapels also contain series of contemporary paintings and sculptures. So, although the inhabitants of Lo have certainly had to face economic hardship and have perhaps experienced a reduction in spiritual vitality and in the awareness of their artistic and cultural heritage, they have certainly not lost their will to preserve and pass on their tradition as well as their social and religious values.

FIGURE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All photographs by Chiara Bellini.

NOTES

- 1 E. Lo Bue, "Tibetan Aesthetics versus Western Aesthetics in the Appreciation of Religious Art", *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. M. Esposito, Paris, 2008, pp. 687–704.
- 2 D. Snellgrove, *Nine Ways of Bon*, Oxford, 1967.
- 3 C. Ramble and M. Kind, "Bonpo monasteries and temples of the Himalayan region", *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya*, ed. S.G. Karmay and Y. Nagano, Delhi, 2008, p. 671.
- 4 Because of insufficient historical information, it is relatively difficult to locate these regions exactly. Zhangzhung included Western Tibet and some regions surrounding it. It was conquered by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo during the first half of the 7th century. Tazik is "vaguely identifiable with Persia" (D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, Boston/London, 1995, p. 99).
- 5 P. Kvaerne, *The Bon Religion of Tibet*, London, 2001, p. 33.
- 6 S.G. Karmay and J. Watt, *Bon, The Magic Word: The Indigenous Religion of Tibet*, New York/London, 2007, p. 48.
- 7 S.G. Karmay and Y. Nagano, *New Horizons in Bon Studies*, Delhi, 2004, p. 313.
- 8 Ramble and Kind, "Bonpo monasteries and temples of the Himalayan region", pp. 671–76.
- 9 G. Baroetto, *Il libro tibetano dei sei lum: L'insegnamento zogcen di Tapi Hritsa*, Roma, 2002, pp. 7–10.
- 10 L. Chandra and T. Namdak, *History and Doctrine of Bon po Nispanna Yoga*, New Delhi, 1968. See also T. Namdak, *Sources for a History of Bon: A collection of rare manuscripts from Bsam-gling Monastery in Dolpo (Northwestern Nepal)*, Dolanji, 1972.
- 11 *rDzogs chen Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.
- 12 *Gshen chen ye shes blo gros kyi drung du so so thar pa'i sdom pa mnos*.
- 13 *Yang ston pa kshis rgyal mtshan sgom phu(g) tu me ri'i bsgrubs pa mdzad*.
- 14 *Dzogs pa chen po zhang zhung ston rgyud la grub thob pa yang ston bla ma bKra shis rgyal mtshan ni dgung lo brgyad u tsa nga la dgongs pa bon dbyings su 'ja' lus 'od skur sngas rgyas so*.