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Uffici di Pisa: Via Santa Bibbiana 28, I 56127 Pisa, tel. +39 050542332, fax +39 050574888, fse@libraweb.net

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EXAMPLES OF BEAUTY AT THE COURT OF SENG GE RNAM GYAL: THE STYLE OF PAINTING IN LADAKH IN THE 17th AND 18th CENTURIES

Chiara Bellini

The temples built in Ladakh during the reign of *Seng ge rNam gyal* contain beautiful and innovative paintings, realized in an extremely elegant and refined style. The divine images are made with naturalism and the historical figures are characterized by the intention to produce portraits. Similar examples are visible in contemporary *thang ka* and wall paintings in Tibet. These splendid paintings testify an important new style evolution and, perhaps, represent the golden age of Ladakhi art. The figures are arranged on a green lawn with stylized shrubs, bushes and rocks in the typical style of Tibet, with strong Chinese influence. These details are a new element in Ladakh paintings. The pictorial style which characterizes the paintings analysed herein is strongly influenced by the *sMan ris* e *mKhyen ris* pictorial schools. Said influence occurred because of the circulation of *thang kas* and, therefore, models produced by Tibetan artists, as well as the persistent cultural exchanges which frequently occurred in these regions of Asia.

T HE religious and political history of Ladakh is marked by the supremacy of two important religious schools taking their names from the Tibetan monasteries of 'Bri gung and 'Brug. Both schools belong to the bKa' brgyud religious order and took turns in controlling the political power in Ladakh with the support of the local court.

The 'Brug pa religious order was founded by master *Gling ras pa Pad ma rdo rje* (1128-1188) and tied to the monastery of *Rva lung*, founded in 1180 by master *Ye shes rdo rje*, though the name of the school belongs to the monastery of 'Brug, in the region of *dBus*. This school, to which the famous master *Pad ma dkar po* (1526-1592) also belonged, spread mainly in Bhutan and Ladakh. Renowned Tibetan master *sTag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho* (1574-1651), known by the epithet of *Shambhunātha*, was a leading figure in the success of the 'Brug order in Ladakh.

sTag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho was a descendant of the Tibetan family *'Khon*, and became an important master of the *'Brug pa* religious order. It was the famous *'Brug pa* master *Lha rtse ba Ngag dbang bzang po* (1546-1615)¹ who asked him to spread the *'Brug pa* teachings in Ladakh. *sTag tshang ras pa* was the first in a series of reincarnates linked to the monastery of *bDe chen*, near *dGon dkar rdzong* in Central Tibet, who became the spiritual preceptors

¹ Schwieger 1996, p. 86.

of the Ladakhi kings. *STag tshang ras pa* travelled tirelessly throughout his life, going to central and eastern Tibet, to the sacred Mount Emei Shan in China, and in 1613 to the Swat Valley and then Zanskar, where he received his first invitation from the sovereign of Ladakh 'Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal.² His prestige led Portuguese Jesuit missionary Francisco de Azevedo, who visited Ladakh in 1631, to call him «the Pope of Ladakh».³

Upon his arrival in Ladakh, *sTag tshang ras pa* was offered hospitality in *Shel* by *Tshe ring rGyal mo*, the first wife of the King '*Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal* – who was then already dead – and their two children. After this, he was received with full honours by Balti Queen *Khatun*, the second wife of '*Jam dbyangs rnam rgyal*, and their son *Seng ge rNam rgyel*, heir to the throne. In 1622, he urged Queen *Kathun* to commission a very large statue for the *Maitreya* temple in Basgo. The statue was begun on 19th October of that year and can still be seen today.

Seng ge rNam rgyel's reign was glorious until his death in 1642. In that same year, the kingdom of gTsang was conquered by Gushri Khan, leader of the Qoshot Mongols, who was determined to continue his campaign and conquer Ladakh. Seng ge rNam rgyel united the forces of upper and lower Ladakh, Zangs dkar, sPu rangs and Ru thog, passing through Wam le – where the teacher sTag tshang ras pa was staying at the time – and settled in Gu ge to await the conflict. The Mongol army retreated, and after about a month the Ladakh militia disbanded and the sovereign returned to Wam le, where he died on 27th November of that same year, before reaching his 50th birthday. Instead, sTag tshang ras pa passed away on 29th January 1651, at the age of 76, many years after his king. He personally gave instructions about his funeral, and his remains were placed in He mis. The funeral was held with a solemn ceremony, preceded by the continuous reading of sacred texts beside his coffin.⁴

The monastery of *He mis* is the most important of the three '*Brug pa* monasteries founded by King *Seng ge rNam rgyal* for Master *sTag tshang ras pa*. In 1630, what was then a hermitage was given to *sTag tshang ras pa* and his followers to found a monastery, the construction work for which was financed by the sovereign himself. The monastery of *He mis*, called *Byang chub bsam gling*, became, and still is, the monastery of the Ladakhi royal family. The *Lha khang rnying ma* was built in 1630, and the *Tshogs khang* – the oldest of the two main '*du khang* – in 1638. The main entrance, located at the side of the complex, leads in to a large courtyard. Set in front of the most important temples, the courtyard is surrounded by a portico.

³ Ibidem, p. 54.

² Ретесн 1977, р. 35.

⁴ A solemn commemorative ceremony was held in 1655 in the presence of the king and his brothers the princes. The biography of *sTag tsang ras pa*, written on request of the sovereign *bDe ldan rNam rgyal*, was finished in 1663. *Ibidem*, p. 60.

The *Lha khang rnying ma* contains the most beautiful paintings in the monastic complex. The style of this paintings is extremely elegant and refined. The divine images are made with naturalism and the historical figures are characterized by the intention to produce portraits. Similar examples are visible in contemporary *thang ka* and wall paintings in Central and Oriental Tibet. These splendid paintings testify an important new style evolution and, perhaps, represent the golden age of Ladakhi art.

On the left wall of the temple there is an exceptional portrait of Shambhu*nātha* (FIG. 1) surrounded by some of his disciples. The master is represented clad in a loose white garment meticulously decorated with small motifs in gold. This kind of outfit, also worn by Mi la ras pa to whom sTag tsang ras pa was spiritually connected, is the hallmark of the practitioners of a yoga that allowed them to release their body heat. Typical of the iconography of Shambhunātha, who is always portrayed with a thin moustache and big earrings, is the white headgear shaped like a tambourine. The throne on which Shambhunātha sits has a wide back with a blue cushion leaning against a rigid white structure made of wood, recognizable in almost all the portraits of masters produced in the 17th century in Central and Eastern Tibet. This throne is painted in perspective, which does not occur in the Ladakhi paintings produced before the 17th century. A lush, flowered shrub painted with extreme care is depicted behind the back of the throne. At the bottom of the image, to Shambhunātha's right, there are portraits of King Seng ge rNam rgyal and his Queen, bsKal bzang sGrol ma, accompanied by a bla ma, and two princes, one of whom is a child and seems to come forward shyly behind his mother (FIG. 2). The Queen is depicted as a beautiful woman, and her face is framed by thin braids that fall over her forehead. She wears elegant clothes which are typical of the period. To the left of the King, who is wearing royal headgear in Tibetan style, there is a standing monk whose curly hair may possibly reveal a portrait rather than a stereotypical representation.

A similar head-dress is visible in a contemporary image at *lCe bde* depicting *Mi la ras pa*, probably produced by the same artist.

The portrait of the royal family is set in an unusual fashion compared with the traditional models. Generally, in fact, Ladakhi rulers were depicted on the left wall near the door accessing the temple, as can be seen in the temples of *A lci, Mang rgyu, Ba sgo, Phyi dbang* and in the chapel of the protective deities of the *rNam rgyal rtse mo*.

In addition, unlike his predecessors, who were depicted holding a stem cup, *Seng ge rNam rgyal* is portrayed with the *dharmacakra*, a religious but also political symbol. The location, style and clothes which represent the sovereign at *He mis*, also reflect a change of a cultural nature due to the influence of Tibet.

Goddess *bKra shis Tshe ring ma*, riding her lion near the sovereign, is depicted to the left of *Shambhunātha*. *Vaishravana* is portrayed in a Chinese style



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

at the centre, at the master's feet. The figures are arranged on a green lawn with stylized shrubs, bushes and rocks in the typical style of eastern Tibet, with strong Chinese influence. These details are a new element in Ladakh paintings, where images were generally arranged in horizontal registers or on flat colour backgrounds. The idea of putting human, but also divine, images in a natural landscape only began in Ladakh in the 17th century.

Besides *Shambhunātha*, *Vajradhara* (FIG. 3) is also surrounded by the most eminent masters of the *bKa' brgyud* tradition. This is one of the most beautiful paintings made in Ladakh, enriched by the extensive use of gold. The deity is portrayed in a gesture that simulates the embrace with his tantric counterpart, in an elegant, not at all static, pose with his head tilted slightly to the right. The fine face smiles and has a gentle expression. The slightly lowered eyelids express the compassionate nature of divinity, a fundamental Buddhist attitude that is not expressed through spontaneous, transitory feeling, but rather conceived as a result, achieved by meditating on the concept of unity between the self and that which surrounds it.

Vajradhara wears a tiara of flaming gems and flowers. His elaborate hairstyle leaves a few strands of hair on his shoulders. The jewels that decorate his chest are made with care, and the clothing, rich in detailed gold decora-



tion including two phoenixes, adheres to his legs with a soft drape, highlighting volumes.

Vajradhara sits on a throne made from the petals of a lotus supported by an architectural element with an octagonal base. Both elements, the lotus and the base, are in perspective, giving the composition a sense of royalty. This kind of throne is a characteristic feature traceable to the artistic production of eastern Tibet as of the late 16th century in particular. Giant peonies complete the composition and frame the large halo that flows around the body of the deity.

Indian masters *Tilopa* (FIG. 4) and *Nāropa* (FIG. 5) are depicted on either side of *Vajradhara*. The expressive power of these two excellent portraits surprise the onlooker. The eccentric-looking faces, the nudity, and the hair that extensively covers their bodies are an excellent representation of the group of teachers to whom *Tilopa* and *Nāropa* belonged: errant and nonconformist *gurus* who did not follow social convention. The vulgarity of the faces and bodies, painted realistically with attention to anatomy, appears to contrast with the sophistication of their hair and the delicacy of the flowers that embellish them. Again, the figures have been painted in a bucolic, idealized setting, enhanced with stylized rocks and large flowers, which symbolically contributes to shortening the divide between the divine and human, between the transcendental entities and the believer who observes the scene.

On the other walls of the temple there are *Bodhisattvas*, tutelary deities, including *Kālacakra* and *Hevajra*, and protectors of the doctrine, including *Mahākāla*. An image of *Shākyamuni* flanked by his disciples and surrounded by some important scenes of his hagiography, such as the one in which he is portrayed when he cuts his hair with a sword as a sign of renouncing to worldly life (FIG. 6), are painted on the main wall.

An important role in the history of Ladakh, which in often unobserved, was played by Queen *bsKal bzang sGrol ma*, a *Ru shod* noblewoman married to *Seng ge rNam rgyal*. This beautiful Queen, portrayed with her husband and children inside the *Lha khang rnying ma* of *He mis*, was the regent of the kingdom for five years, holding the unique title of «Lady Protector»,⁵ from the death of her husband in 1642 until the coronation of her sons in 1647. The ceremony to establish the new sovereign was celebrated with a solemn assembly. The queen, after assuring *Mas pro, dByi gu* and *sPu rang* as her own personal estates, divided the kingdom amongst her three sons in this way: Gu ge to *Indra rNam rgyal*, Zanskar and Spiti to *bDe mchog rNam rgyal*, and the rest of the kingdom of *mNga' ris skor gsum*, high and low Ladakh, was assigned to the Prince Regent *bDe ldan rNam rgyal*.⁶ *bsKal bzang sGrol ma* built a temple to honour her dead husband at *lCe bde*, south of the village of *gSer khri* on the bank

⁵ Sa skyong ba'i dbang mo. ⁶ Petech 1977, p. 59.





Fig. 5.

above the Indus, a few kilometres from Leh. The building, around which the present monastery was built, was inaugurated in March 1644 by *sTag tsang ras pa* and completed on either 30^{th} March 1645 or 18^{th} April 1646.⁷ The following

⁷ Ibidem, p. 57.



year, the Queen and the Master commissioned the construction of another temple in honour of the deceased King, adjoining the royal palace at *Shel*.

The oldest paintings of the *lCe bde* monastery are housed in the chapel called *Bla ma lha khang* and are extraordinary examples of paintings produced in the 17th century. They are the same quality as those in the ancient temple of *He mis*. The paintings were probably made from the same school of artists who worked in *He mis* and, as we shall see, in *Shel*. These artists were, perhaps, from Tibet, being called to Ladakh specifically to work for the court and important masters such as *Shambhunātha*. *sTag tshang ras pa* and the Queen went to Tibet several times, as attested by sources. It is possible that skilled Tibetan artists made important cycles of paintings in the temples of Ladakh at the behest of the Queen and the great master.

The pictorial style which characterizes the paintings analysed herein is strongly influenced by the *sMan ris* e *mKhyen ris*⁸ pictorial schools. In general, the great *'Brug pa* hierarchies of the 16th and 17th centuries traditionally patronized painters from both the *sMan ris* and *mKhyen ris* lineages.⁹

The interior of *Bla ma lha khang* houses some paintings which are extremely valuable, despite the layer of soot which covers them almost concealing them from view.

The main wall is partially covered by a number of clay statues which may date back to the construction of the temple, amongst some portraits of masters of the *bKa' brgyud pa* order and, at the centre, *Padmasamabhava* flanked by both his two wives and the two main protectors of the *rNying ma pa* order, *Guru Drag po* and *Seng ge sGrol ma*. On the same wall, several valuable paintings are visible behind the statues: *Shākyamuni* in the centre, surrounded by the sixteen wise masters.

A further three statues stand in the corner between the main and right hand side walls. An extraordinary image of *Vajradhara* (FIG. 7) can be seen behind them, flanked by *bKa' brgyud* masters. The jewels, garment, decorations and general details have been skilfully produced. Particularly noteworthy is the large necklace made of interwoven coral thread, fastened with finely designed decorative elements. The deity wears a kind of waistcoat, similar to the one of the *Vajradhara* painted in *He mis*, which covers the upper part of his bust. Besides the extremely refined design, what is remarkable about both this piece and the one in *He mis* is the extensive use of gold, a precious material which indicates the social status of the purchaser.

The most prominent masters of the *bKa' brgyud pa* lineage are found next to *Vajradhara*, amongst which *Tilopa* (FIGG. 8, 9) and *Mi la ras pa* (FIGG. 10, 11), for example, displaying the extraordinary talent of the artists who produced them. *Tilopa* (FIG. 8) is depicted in a naturalistic pose which reveals the artist's interest in anatomy. He appears to have been caught during a conversation or

⁸ Cf. JACKSON 1996. ⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 184.







a moment of mockery, and this naturalness is accentuated by the dynamic movement of his body and expressiveness of his countenance. The Indian *Mahāsiddha* is offering a *kapāla*, his arm outstretched, and the gesture appears to be emphasized by the movement of the pointed beard, which is also turned in the same direction. The stole and garments, fluttering in the wind, bring to mind certain coeval examples of western art. The elaborate hairstyle, em-



Fig. 9.

bellished with thin strings of pearls and a luxuriant garland of flowers (FIG. 9), reveals the hand of the artist or artists who worked in *He mis*.

Mi la ras pa (FIG. 10) is also depicted on the same wall with short, curly hair and a special kind of ear-ring, formed of a cylindrical element similar to a small bone or a segment taken from the spiral of a shell (FIG. 11). These iconographical details, rather rare in depictions of *Mi la ras pa*, are also visible in a *thang ka* from eastern Tibet, produced around the second half of the 14th century.¹⁰

Other paintings of the same pictorial quality can be found both on the wall at the entrance and the one on the left. A portrait of *Shambhunātha* is depicted on the former, whilst on the latter there is a picture of *Padmasamabhava* surrounded by his retinue, although difficult to make out due to the darkness and a bookcase leaning against the wall.

¹⁰ The thang ka, part of a private collection, was published in CASEY SINGER & DENWOOD 1997, pp. 14, 67.



Fig. 10.

As for the monastery of *lCe bde*, the temple adjacent to the royal palace of *Shel dKar* was also founded by Queen *bsKal bzang sGrol ma*, with the support of *sTag tshang ras pa*. The Royal Temple of *Shel* was begun in 1647 and finished

[16]



Fig. 11.

thanks also to the support of the two Prince Royals, *bDe ldan rNam rgyal* and *Indra rNam rgyal*.¹¹

Inside the temple, there is a large, embossed, gilded copper statue of *Shākyamuni*, wished for by Prince *bDe ldan rNam rgyal*. It was produced by six Newar artists, all from *Phyi gling* bar one who came from the Nepal Valley. The paintings decorating the chapel have been produced in the same style as those in *He mis* and *lCe bde*. Unfortunately, brutal restoration work carried out on paintings which were already in a severe state of ruin, has obscured rather than enhanced their beauty, perhaps irreparably.

The splendid portrait of a master of the bKa' brgyud pa tradition, probably gTsang pa rGya ras (1161-1211) (FIG. 12) is visible on the wall to the right of the entrance. gTsang pa rGya ras was the very first 'Brug chan and founded the

11 Ретесн 1977, р. 59.



FIG. 12.

monastery of *gNam gyi phur* in 1205. He played a decisive role in the spread of *'Brug pa* teaching and was a disciple of *Gling ras pa Padma rdo rje* (1128-1188), founder of *Rva lung*, who is perhaps depicted on his left and was, in turn, a pupil of *Phag mo gru pa*. One of the statues preserved inside the *Bla ma lha khang* in *lCe bde* once again depicts him with a thin moustache, characteristic iconography which appears to be typical of the *'Brug pa* masters and reflects a custom which was in vogue at the time. Contemporary artist *Tshe ring dbang 'dus* depicted *gTsang pa rGya ras* accompanied by *Gling ras pa Padma rdo rje* and

Shambhunātha in a small chapel in *sNye mo*, where the representatives of the lineages of the most important religious orders are portrayed. Moreover, *Gling ras pa Padma rdo rje* is depicted amongst the clay statues in the '*du khang* in *He mis*.

gTsang pa rGya ras, also recognised as the reincarnation of *Nāropa*, is remembered as an important master of his tradition and a great saint. According to hagiographical sources, on the day of his funeral a kind of canopy manifested in the sky forming a rainbow¹² and flowers rained down.¹³ He was also one of the masters of *rGod tshang pa* (1189-1258) who, along with '*Jig rten mgon po*, was another important spreader of *bKa' brgyud pa* teachings in the region of *Kailāsa Manasarovar*¹⁴ and, subsequently, Ladakh.

On the lobes of *gTsang pa rGya ras*'s ears (FIG. 5.22) there are holes which allude to the use of earrings, unusual for a monk. Indeed, earrings were normally found as part of a laic master or *siddha*'s outfit. These holes, perhaps, intend to remind the onlooker of the bond between these great abbots and the ascetics who came before them and can also be counted in the *'Brug pa* lineage.

The decorations on the clothes and the fabric covering the soft seat on which this personage sits are drawn with a thin gold line. The special kind of seat, with a wide blue back rest, the upper part of which is edged with a white drape, is the same one on which *sTag tshang ras pa* in *He mis* is depicted, and appeared on *thang kas* and wall-paintings as of the 16th-17th century. It became a typical characteristic of the portraits of great abbots and masters, especially in central and eastern Tibet. Around the portrait of the *bla ma* there are masters and disciples of his lineage, immersed in exotic, flourishing vegetation which does not correspond with the flora of the Ladakh, and shows traces of the chinese influence which had perhaps reached Ladakh from eastern Tibet.

Said influence occurred because of the circulation of paintings and, therefore, models produced by Tibetan artists, as well as the persistent cultural exchanges which frequently occurred in these regions of Asia.

On the same wall, although partially covered by a wardrobe, there is an image of *sTag tshang ras pa* (FIG. 13) depicted with the appearance he must have had during the period in which the temple was built, when he was over seventy and nearing the end of his life. His whitened hair and beard frame a face with a more austere expression than the smiling one he had in the *He mis* por-

¹³ ROERICH 1976, p. 670.

¹⁴ Petech 1977, p. 20.

¹² These kinds of phenomena, often described in Tibetan sources, have something to do with particular shapes taken on by rainbows in the sky like, for example, circular rainbows around the sun, overturned rainbows or double rainbows. In the case above, the one described in the hagiography of *gTsang pa rgya ras*, this is the so-called circumzenithal arch which usually forms in very cold places at high altitudes owing to the refraction of the rays of sunlight by small ice crystals. This kind of rainbow has much brighter colours than those of a normal rainbow, produced by rays of sunlight deflected by drops of water.



FIG. 13.

trait (FIG. 1) produced when the master must have been rather young, and of the one a little later on which is housed in the *Bla ma lha khang* in *lCe bde*. The portraits confirm the dating of the temples and appear to proceed in a parallel fashion to the life of this great master, without being stereotypical. The changes in his appearance during the years were accurately 'photographed' by the artists who portrayed him and knew how to capture his expression, too, which became increasingly wiser and more knowledgeable with the passing of time. A rich throne adds value to the image, perhaps wishing to underline the importance of this master in Ladakh, also compared with the other historical figures depicted here.

A large, somewhat ruined image of *Padmasamabhava*, accompanied by two beautiful female figures depicting his two wives, the Nepalese, *Mandārāva* (FIG. 14), and the Tibetan *Ye shes mtsho rgyal*, is visible on the opposite wall.

Although in bad condition, and despite dreadful restoration work, it is still possible to admire two masterpieces of Ladakh Buddhist art. The two female figures, produced in an extremely elegant fashion and characterized by a sense of lightness but at the same time solidity, bring to mind the ideal of beauty of the woman during that time. Moreover, one must not forget the



FIG. 14.

importance Queen *bsKal bzang* held during this period and one of the two figures may even be a portrait of her.

A few hundred metres from the royal palace of *Shel*, there is another chapel, housing paintings produced in the same style. Here, on this site, there are a further two temples founded by *Seng ge rNam rgyal*, that of *Shākyamuni*, and Queen *bsKal bzang sGrol ma*, that of *Amitāyus*,¹⁵ respectively.

Besides this, Queen *bsKal bzang* had the small chapel dedicated to *Maitreya* built too, located near the temple of *gSer zangs*, inside the *Ba sgo* complex. An inscription says that the Queen had the temple built and decorated in 1642. The style is similar to that of the paintings in the upper temple at *Ba sgo* as well as those of *Phyi dbang*, although the construction date shows that the building is more or less coeval to the paintings of *He mis*. Nevertheless, the difference between the pictorial styles of the two temples is clear. This contributes to confirming the hypothesis that the paintings in the *Lha khang rnying ma* of *He mis*, the *Bla ma lha khang* in *lCe bde*, the Palatine temple in *Shel* and that of the village just a few hundred metres from the palace may have been decorated by Tibetan artists, perhaps from Central Tibet or, more likely, ladakhi artists influenced by the Tibetan style.

¹⁵ Snellgrove & Skorupski 1977, p. 91.

Queen *bsKal bzang sGrol ma*, by now elderly, appears to have been particularly active during the last few years of her life. Indeed, she sent missions to Central Tibet in the name of the court and monastery of *He mis*, and undertook a pilgrimage to *Kailāsa* in 1650, despite the venerable master *Shambhunātha* being against the idea worried, as he was, for the Queen's health. It was during a trip in Zanskar that the Queen became ill, leaving her mortal remains in *bZang la*. Her body was subsequently taken to *Shel*, where her funeral was held. A long *ma ni* votive wall, built at that time, bears her memory.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Ретесн 1977, р. 59.