

TIBETAN ART

The Art of Tibet reflects the complex character of Tibetan culture born on Central Asian cross/roads under the powerful impact of Indian, Chinese and Central Asian cultures. Tibetan Art, as we know it, is an essentially religious art stimulated by the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet between the middle of the VII-th century A.D. and the beginning of the XIII-th. This religious art was superimposed on an ancient nomadic tribal ornamental art characterized by the so-called "animal" style, that is the use of animal motifs in ornamentation. This tribal art has not disappeared from Tibet, and its tradition still lives among the nomad Tibetan tribes of the North and North-East. With time this tribal art came under the strong influence of Chinese art and the impact of this influence was made stronger by the fact that Chinese artisans in the Sino-Tibetan border/country were working for the nomads and were supplying them with jewelry, side-arms and saddlery adapted to the taste of tribal buyers, and incorporating into the purely nomad ornamentation elements of Chinese ornamental art. This ancient tribal art was intimately connected with the ancient pre-buddhistic faith of Tibet, the so-called Bon and many of its ornamental motifs and themes originated from that source. With the advent of Buddhism, the character and inspiration of Tibetan art underwent a decisive and radical change. Since the middle of the VII-th century A.D. the character of Tibetan art was moulded under the powerful influence of Indian Buddhist art which penetrated into Tibet through two important cultural channels - Kashmir in the West and Nepal in the East. The spread of Buddhism in Tibet coincided with the foundation of the Pala Empire in Eastern India (Bihar and Bengal), a period which saw the last revival of Buddhism in India. The Pala kings were pious builders of large monastic establishments, some of which became great centres of Buddhist learning enjoying international fame.

Thus the first ruler of the dynasty, Gopala (c. 765-773) built the great Buddhist vihara at Otantapuri in Behar, and his son and successor Dharmapala (770-815) the equally famous vihara and monastic university of Vikramashila, and that of Somapura (Baharpur). The ancient Buddhist university of Nalanda developed into a mighty centre of Buddhist learning and was still standing in the XIII-th century when pious Tibetan pilgrims worshipped in its shrines and temples. The spread of Buddhism into Tibet and the beginnings of Tibetan art are intimately connected with these centres of Buddhist culture and learning. The history of Tibetan Buddhism and culture cannot be written without reference to these centres of ancient Indian culture. Numerous Indian Buddhist panditas proceeded to Tibet in search of new fields for the propagation of their faith beyond the Himalayas, and numerous Tibetans came to study at Nalanda and Vikramashila and some of them were even elected to the teaching staffs of the viharas, and attained the high degree of dvara-panditas. The Muslim invasion of North-East India accelerated the pace of the migration of Buddhist culture in Tibet and in the XII and XIII-th centuries Tibet became a cultural province of India. It was in these monastic establishments that was created the rich religious art of the Pala epoch, distinguished by its perfect execution of stone sculptures in black carboniferous shale and clay slate, and numerous cast images. The art of casting brass and bronze images was adopted by Tibetan schools of art. The art of the Pala period though following the Gupta artistic tradition, was characterized by a strong Tantric inspiration with a pronounced predilection for rich ornamentation, a predilection which passed into the art of Nepal and Tibet. Under the Palas, the Buddhist pantheon was enriched by a host of new iconographical forms, mudras and postures, or asanas. Contrary to the usually held view, purely Tibetan additions to this pantheon are insignificant and we are justified in stating that the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, as we know it, is a faithful reproduction of the Buddhist pantheon of the Pala-Sena epoch. Much of this pantheon is of

Shaiva origin. After 1027 A.D. one discerns the appearance of Vaishnava symbology, which accompanied the introduction of the Kalacakra system. The centre of artistic activity was the land of Magadha, considered to be the true India by Tibetans. According to the great Tibetan Buddhist scholar Taranatha *Geschichte des Buddhismus in Indien*, translated by A. Schiefner, page 279-80 two art schools flourished in Magadha during the Pala period, the western school which followed the tradition of a famous artist Shringadhara, and the Eastern school established by the famous Dhiman and his son Vitpala who lived in the land of Varendra (North Bengal), in the time of the Pala kings Dharmapala and Devapala. Later the followers of Vitpala became known as the Madhyadesha school in Magadha. The influence of this school radiated as far as Kashmir and from there penetrated into Tibet and contributed towards the establishment of the Guge artistic tradition in West Tibet with which we are familiar thanks to the work of Professor G. Tucci, the eminent Italian scholar. After the downfall of the Sena kings, Nepal became the repository of Pala-Sena artistic tradition. According to Taranatha (*ibid* p. 280), the early Nepalese school of art followed the tradition of the old Western school founded by Shringadhara, but the later Nepalese school under the influence of the Eastern school. It was this school that penetrated into Central Tibet, and moulded the religious art of Tibet. The province of Tsang in Tibet, adjoining Nepal from the north, became the centre of Tibetan artistic life from where its influence radiated towards the east and north-east. This school created the so-called Central Tibetan style of painting. The pictorial art is represented by painted religious banners, the so-called thang-kas, and wall frescoes, sometimes of a very high quality. Early examples of this art exhibit strong Nepalese inspiration. The art of Tibetan miniature painting is also of Indo-Nepalese origin. This art was very popular in the XI-th and XII-th centuries A.D., and a number of illuminated manuscripts belong to this period.

The arrival of the famous Atisa (1042 A.D.) in Tibet resulted in the strengthening of the influence of the Pala Buddhist art in Tibet. In ancient India and Nepal much of the architecture was of wood and the walls were richly sculptured and adorned with frescoes. The same is true of Tibetan temples of the early period. Some of the ancient Tibetan monasteries are built in the style of ancient Buddhist viharas with a central courtyard surrounded by monastic cells, with a caitya hall at the end. Newari artists and craftsmen brought this Nepalese art in Tibet, where they helped to build temples, cast images and painted frescoes. Until recent times the Newari craftsmen of Lhasa and Shigatse preserved their reputation as artists, and gold and silver smiths. The tradition of Indian guild work thus penetrated into Tibet, and guilds of Nepalese artists and craftsmen established themselves at important monastic and trading centres. In Tibet one does not distinguish between the Pala and Nepalese schools. All metal cast images and paintings executed in the Indo/Nepalese style are called Pe-tri (Bal-bris), or "Nepalese style". Between the VIII-th and XVI-th centuries the influence of this Indo-Nepalese art was paramount in Southern Tibet, and the Tsang school of art can be best described as a tributary of the Indo-Nepalese art.

In Western Tibet, the art of the kingdom of Guge, of the X-XI-th centuries from where originated Tibetan religious and political renaissance, was strongly influenced by the Kashmir school of art of the IX-th century (the so-called Avantipura school which had received its inspiration from the old Madhyadesha school of Pala-Sena art.

There exists also a strong evidence that Shri-Dhanyakataka (modern Dharnikot in Guntur District of Madras State), or Amaravati, has been an art centre of importance, the influence of which spread beyond the Himalayas. In Tibet ancient metal images known as "shar-ri" (so called after Purvashaila, a ridge of hills east of Dhanyakataka) are highly valued.

Nepal and Kashmir were not the only gates through which Indian Buddhist art penetrated into Tibet. A powerful stream of cultural influences of Indian and Iranian inspiration penetrated the country from the North across the bleak northern uplands. Khotan north of the Kun-lun range in Turkestan was an important centre of Mahayanist learning, and Buddhist scholars from India used to go there for study and to consult manuscripts preserved in the local libraries. This influence was prominent in the VIII-th and IX-th centuries A.D., during which period Tibet maintained close political and cultural relations with the countries of Higher Asia, and this influence should not be underestimated. Quite a few of the iconographical types originated from Khotan, the sixteen great Arhats, the winged kinnaras and the lekपालas to mention only a few.

East Tibet, the region of Kham-Derge, developed an art style of its own. In the early periods the influence of the Indo-Nepalese art was strong there, and early examples exhibit high qualities in design and colouring. The late Sir Aurel Stein has found paintings in the Indo-Nepalese style in the cave-temples of Tun-huang in the Kansu Province of Western China. With the increase of China's political and cultural influence, the East Tibetan centres of art came under the strong influence of Chinese art, especially in the treatment of accessories and landscape backgrounds of paintings. On some painted banners the beginnings of genre painting are observed. In the XVI-th century with the advent of the Buddhist renaissance under the Ming Emperors, a strong influence of the North-East begins to be felt in the art of the Central Tibetan school art, and ever since this influence remained on the increase. During the XVII-th and XVIII-th centuries Tibetan art reached its apogee in technique and execution powerfully influenced by the art of the Hanchu period. In its turn Tibetan art exercised a considerable influence on the art of adjoining regions. Tibetan influences are discernable in the paintings of the Turfan cave temples in Chinese Turkestan. The Tangut or Hsi-hsia kingdom of

the X-XIII centuries possessed a brilliant religious art entirely Tibetan in its inspiration. Remarkable examples of this art can be seen in the Kozlov collection preserved in Leningrad. Mongolia since the second half of the XVI-th century adopted the Tibetan form of Buddhism and with it its art.

During the Yuan and Ch'ing periods Tibetan art exercised an influence on Chinese art facilitated by the policy of the Imperial Court to support Buddhism throughout the Mongol-Tibetan borderland.

In the South, Tibetan art penetrated south of the Himalayas. Bhutan developed an artistic style of its own, which though dependent on the Khams school, is sufficiently individualistic, and has produced quite remarkable examples of painting and craftsmanship.

In recent years an interesting phenomenon is being observed the introduction of Tibetan art among the Buddhists of Nepal. In this case one is justified to describe this phenomenon as a reintroduction of a branch of the Indo-Nepalese art into the country of its origin.

Born on Central Asian cross-roads, Tibetan art remained throughout its history a colourful blend of Indian and Chinese influences, yet exhibiting a powerful individuality accentuated by the inaccessible character of the country. An art entirely hieratic and spiritually refined.