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REVIEWS

Three Recent Publications on Artwork From the Tibetan Collections of Europe

Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, *Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama: The Gold Manuscript of the Fournier Collection*. London: Serindia Publications, 1988. 260 pp. 86 color plates.

Gilles Béguin, *Tibet, Terreur et Magie: Dieux Farouches du Musée Guimet*. Brussels: Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, 1989. 194 pp. 62 color plates.

Gerd-Wolfgang Essen and Tsering Tashi Thingo, *Die Götter des Himalaya: Buddhistische Kunst Tibets, die Sammlung Gerd-Wolfgang Essen*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1989. 2 vols. 300 + 304 pp. 203 color plates + 459 black and white plates.

During a visit to France in March 1989, I noticed that a popular magazine had recently conducted a survey of French adults, that included the question, "Which foreign country do you most wish to visit?" Tibet - a land that most Americans can't locate on the map - was ranked third, following closely on the heels of California and Texas! There is a lively European interest in Tibet, fueled not by Dallas and Falconcrest, but by more varied cultural exposure, to which museums and private collections, and the collectors, curators and scholars who have sought to use these as vehicles for the education of the public, have contributed no small part. The publications reviewed here offer abundant evidence of the impressive European commitment to the preservation and interpretation of Tibetan material culture, and of the important role being played by Tibetan scholars in these areas in Europe.

The first of these exquisite contributions to the study of Tibetan art presents a facsimile and study of the so-called Gold Manuscript of the Fournier collection. Though individual leaves from Tibetan manuscripts have often appeared in collections and catalogues devoted to Tibetan painting, this is perhaps the first monograph concerning a single illuminated manuscript from Tibet, a manuscript, indeed, that well merits the detailed treatment it receives here. A version of the esoteric autobiography (*gsang-ba'i mam-thar*) of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngag-dbang blo-bzang rgya-mtsho (1617-82), its calligraphy and painting were executed under the author's personal direction, and represent 17th century Tibetan artistry of the highest degree of excellence. The aesthetic interest of the Gold Manuscript, moreover, is mirrored in the intrinsic interest of the text it contains, for the esoteric autobiography is a personal record of the Great Fifth's visionary experiences, and so brings to us an important and fascinating, if also sometimes disconcerting, impression of the interior world of Tibetan Buddhist visionary experience.

Secret Visions of the Fifth Dalai Lama is a particularly beautiful example of the fine art of Western book manufacture, generously printed in 14-point type on pages measuring 10" x 14". The aesthetic qualities of the volume thus suitably frame the presentation of the Gold Manuscript, the text portions of which are reproduced in full in black and white (pp. 176-237), while the illuminations are given in color reproductions of very high quality, with accompanying detailed explanation (pp. 71-173). By presenting the manuscript in its entirety, its integrity is preserved, and its author's intentions are not set aside, as unfortunately occurs when valuable illuminated manuscripts are cannibalized, as too often they are, for their illustrative content alone.

Samten G. Karmay, in his learned commentaries on the Gold Manuscript, seeks to situate the author in the history of Tibet (pp. 1-12) and the manuscript (which was produced in 1673-4) in the life of the author (pp. 13-18): in the course of his account he sheds much light on the Great Fifth's inner circle. He provides a very thorough summary of the texts' contents (pp. 27-70), and in his comments on the plates has painstakingly identified the scores of ritual objects and substances illustrated. His careful

delineation of the manuscript's historical context and content is well complemented by an essay on "The Style and Artistic Content" of the Gold Manuscript, contributed by Heather Stoddard (pp. 19-26).

The manuscript itself is calligraphed in gold on a black background, and the illuminations detail, for the most part, the ritual objects and altar arrangements required for the rites performed in a connection with the Great Fifth's visions (*dag-srang*), which are often considered to have the status of "rediscovered treasures" (*gter-ma*) As Stoddard comments (p. 19):

Leafing slowly through the diptych and triptych panels of the illuminations, the reader is struck by a pervading atmosphere of 'tremendum'. An immediate sensation of intrusion into a secret universe arises. Mental projections, transcribed into complex and tangible symbols, appear, suspended, revolving in a charcoal black void, destined for inner eyes and for the manipulation of the powerful forces of the inner psyche.

The "sensation of intrusion" is indeed one that arises unavoidably upon exposure to this work, and signals its genuine power as an artistic and religious document. It is also probably fair to say that the extremely esoteric nature of the subject-matter effectively limits the readership for this book: specialized students of Tibetan art and tantric ritual will find it invaluable, while others may be simply mystified by this material.

Ignoring minor misprints, two points seem to require brief comment here. Karmay argues (p. 17) that the Gold Manuscript was uniquely manufactured, following the initial production of a paper manuscript copy of the text based on the Great Fifth's dictation. Learned and high-ranking figures from Lhasa with whom I've discussed this, however, maintain that there were several exactly similar manuscripts, perhaps as many as half a dozen, chiefly held by those considered successors to the authoritative transmission of the Great Fifth's visionary teaching. It seems entirely plausible that the Great Fifth would have ordered the simultaneous production of these manuscripts, so as to insure that his ritual specifications were followed precisely by the holders of his lineage, though plausibility by no means insures that this was the case. A more precise determination of the facts of the matter, however, would no doubt enhance our knowledge of the Great Fifth's immediate succession, and of the fate of his teachings during the years of turmoil following his reign.

A second point that may raise Tibetological eyebrows is Karmay's translation of the title of the first text contained in the Gold Manuscript - *mThong-ba don-ldan* - as *Visions and their Significance*. This is a very common phrase in Tibetan book-titles, and is always taken to mean, simply, *Meaningful to See* - it may just as well occur as the title of a logic textbook as that of an esoteric biography. I questioned Karmay about this recently, and he acknowledged that his translation was an unusual one, but added that he felt that in this case there is a sort of double meaning suggested by the title, the "seeing" referred to being both reader's and author's. This seems probable, though perhaps *Significant Sight* would have better captured the nuance intended.

The outstanding museum collection of Tibetan and Himalayan art in France is, of course, to be found in the Musée Guimet, which is due to be further enriched soon through an extensive contribution of objects from the Fournier Collection. In the absence of a comprehensive catalogue of the Guimet's holdings, publications documenting particular facets of that museum's abundant resources have usefully filled parts of the gap. Gilles Béguin, Curator of the Tibet-Nepal Department of the Guimet, has previously given us an exhibition catalogue of *Les maṇḍala himālayens du musée Guimet* (Paris, 1981), and many articles documenting particular objects. *Tibet, Terreur et Magie* provides a tantalizing sampling of the Guimet's sculptures and paintings of wrathful deities, as exhibited recently (February 17 - May 14, 1989) in Brussels.

Most of the objects illustrated here are relatively recent (17th-19th centuries), the earliest belonging to the 15th century. They exemplify, however, the wonderful exuberance Tibetan artisans brought to the depiction of divine and semi-divine anger and rage. In an 18th century Sino-Tibetan or Mongolian statue of Simāhavaktrā (no. 3), for instance, the combination of the smooth sensuousness of a dancer's body creates an energetic counterpoint with her flaming lioness's head; a 19th century Tibetan Yama (no. 20), trampling a buffalo, his eyes exploding from his enraged visage, seems about to leap off the canvas on which he is painted; and a 19th century Sino-Tibetan *thang-ka* of Vaisāraṇa and Virūpākṣa (no. 39),

though depicting these demi-gods in relatively pacific form, entices the eye into a wildly fluid world of colorful textile patterns. From a historical perspective, two of the most interesting paintings are of Hevajra: one from north China (no. 49), dated 1474, seems interestingly suggestive of both Nepalese and Karakhoto works; and a possibly 16th century Hevajra, also representing Ming China, conveys an unusual degree of luminousness through its use of shading and wash.

Like the catalogues of the Essen collection, reviewed below, an attempt is made here to employ an emic scheme of classification. The wrathful deities are divided as being "guardian deities of religion" (*dieux gardiens de la religion*, nos. 1-43), or "tutelary divinities" (*diviniteés tutelaires*, nos. 44-62). Each of these major categories is then subdivided into a number of specific groups of deities. While this was certainly a promising idea, providing a means to organize the material that also offers insight into the Tibetan scheme of things, care should have been taken to master the appropriate Tibetan taxonomies and to apply them consistently and accurately. Thus, for instance, Tibetan taxonomic order would have required placing the tutelaries (Tib. *yi-dam*) before the "guardians" (Tib. *chos-skyong*); and, what is more, the specific deities concerned have often been misclassified in any case: Hayagriva (nos. 12-15) and Vajrabhairava (nos. 25-33) are in fact "tutelaries", not "guardians"; Samvara (nos. 51-56) is a "tutelary" in its own right, not a form of Hevajra, as their classification together under the latter rubric suggests.

Of special interest is no. 57 (and thus included in the Hevajra section), identified here as "Vajrakāla, aspect de Heruka." This highly interesting 18th (or early 19th) century Rnying-ma-pa icon seems to me to be misidentified. I suggest that it is better regarded as a Rnying-ma-pa form of Mañjuśrī-Yamāntaka (*'jam-dpal gshin-rje-gshed*), though further investigation is required.

Despite the taxonomic confusions, the catalogue is a useful and attractive one, and Béguin's notes on each piece carefully document previous studies of them.

The Essen Tibetica collection is justly famed for its comprehensive nature, and the studious care taken to insure its overall balance and far-reaching scope is clearly reflected in the two sumptuous volumes of *Die Götter des Himalaya*. In the first, 200 selected books, sculptures, paintings, ritual objects and textiles are illustrated in color, with extensive descriptive and explanatory notes, while the second volume is a *catalogue raisonné* of the entire Essen collection, describing each of its 750 pieces briefly, and illustrating in black and white those not seen in the first volume.

The first volume is a particularly successful example of the effort to use an emic taxonomy to explain Tibetan artifacts to the West. Sections A-C concern the icons of the Three Jewels, Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha, while D-F turn on the complementary tantric categories of the Three Roots, Guru, Deity and Dākinī. In section G we find cosmological models, and in H the mundane and protective deities. I concerns pantheons, J monastery plans, K propitiatory and oracular diagrams, L ritual objects, and M handicrafts. These sections are in turn divided into chapters with scrupulous attention to Tibetan classificatory schemes: the three chapters forming section D (Gurus), for instance, concern first the sages and scholars of India, then the figures involved in the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism, and finally the Lamas of the major Tibetan Buddhist orders, arranged with due regard to lineage. The catalogue, in short, conveys the Tibetan Buddhist world to us through both the objects depicted and the manner in which they are presented.

Given the wealth of material found here, one cannot, in a brief review, adequately characterize the Essen collection in its particulars: most periods and styles are represented, and the iconographic range is dizzying. We find, as before, that most of the objects are of recent origin, though some (particularly sculptures) are 15th century or earlier. Especially notable in this regard are a Bka'-gdams-pa painting of the Buddha Amoghasiddhi (vol. 1, no. 6) assigned to the 13th century, and Ladakhi painting of the deity Acala (vol. 1, no. 99) of the 11th or 12th. A statue of the famous Bka'-brgyud-pa master Phag-mo-gru-pa (1110-70, vol. 1, no. 84), assigned to the 13th or 14th century, in its elegant simplicity and realism, provides a striking instance of relatively early Tibetan artistic achievement. Many of the later pieces, too, are exceptional: among this writer's favorites are magnificent *thang-kas* of Padmasambhava in his wrathful aspect (*gu-ru drag-po*, vol. 1, no. 67), and of the Tiger-riding Mahākāla (*mgon-po stag-zhon*, vol. 1, no. 133). The intricate treatment of the fractal formations of flames, clouds and rocks, revealing an energetically chaotic but meticulously ordered universe in these and similar late eastern Tibetan

paintings, displays a marriage of aesthetic and philosophical genius that was one of the signal achievements of Tibetan civilization.

Students of Tibet will be universally grateful to Herr Essen for sharing with them the magnificent accomplishment of many years of thoughtful and perceptive research and collecting.

There is a lesson in all of this for students of Tibetan art history: we will be seeing increasing attention, in the effort to understand Tibetan Buddhist art, to cultural historical context and to indigenous taxonomies. These elements have been too often (though not entirely) neglected in the treatment of Tibetan art in the United States, with the result that Tibetan artifacts seem frequently to achieve the debased status of mute objects. Tibetan art, like Tibetan literature and ritual, belongs to a system of discourse: it is a pleasure to acknowledge the effort some in the West are now making to record its grammar.

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