

December 2017

Object Lessons from Tibet & the Himalayas

Thupten Kelsang

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Kelsang, Thupten (2017) "Object Lessons from Tibet & the Himalayas," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 2 , Article 21.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss2/21>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Conference Report is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized

***Object Lessons from Tibet & the
Himalayas***

University of Manchester

9 June 2017

The material culture of Tibet and the Tibetan cultural matrix has been extensively sought, collected and studied in the Euro-American world since the beginning of the twentieth century. The expansion of scholarship on Tibetan culture necessitated access to and the subsequent acquisition of indigenous material culture. In this regard, there have been two seminal moments in Tibetan history which can be classified as major flows (or extraction) of objects to the West: the Younghusband Expedition/Invasion (1903–04) and the mass exodus of Tibetan refugees in 1959. When Colonel Francis E. Younghusband from the British Empire led a full-scale military excursion into Tibet as an attempt to forcibly 'open' Tibet to trade and political diplomacy, many objects were looted from monasteries and the homes of elite Tibetans by the military officers. While the movement of Tibetan objects was not always forced—for instance, in the case of diplomatic gift exchanges—an implied Tibetan agency (consent) demands closer

scrutiny as Charles Bell (1870–1945) and his ‘ethical’ colleagues were beneficiaries of power hierarchies and complicated legacies of the Younghusband Expedition. While coming from a broad spectrum of collecting practices and motivations, Tibetan objects were accessioned into the collections of Western museums, and were employed and valued as conduits of Tibetan culture.

While the knowledge production of Tibetan material and visual culture has been rooted in a colonial framework, it has been categorically addressed by scholars on Tibet such as Donald Lopez Jr., Martin Brauen, and Clare Harris in their publications. In line with their approach to problematising this subject, the first Object Lessons from Tibet seminar, <<https://objectlessonsfromtibetblog.wordpress.com>>, held at the University of Manchester in June 2017, laid the foundations to begin collectively addressing the colonial legacies as well as the subjectivities which inform and drive the academic discourse, museological and curatorial practices on Tibetan material culture. Conceived at the International Association of Tibetan Studies conference in Bergen, Norway, this initiative is led by Emma Martin (University of Manchester) in collaboration with Diana Lange (Humboldt University, Berlin), Trine Brox (University of Copenhagen), and Miriam Koktvedgaard Zeitzen (University of Copenhagen). As a research community, this initiative aims to bring together academics, museum professionals, indigenous scholars, and groups and cultural organizations in Europe to foster an object-oriented approach to understanding the loss and recovery of cultures through knowledge production. By bringing such a diverse set of individuals and

organizations together, it encourages an interdisciplinary approach towards Tibetan material culture and is able to factor in a spectrum of vantage points and perspectives. Most importantly, by creating and reorienting knowledge networks which stress the inclusion of source communities, this initiative has the potential to galvanize a new precedent, becoming a focal point for engagement and collaboration with the indigenous Tibetan community, which at times remains insulated from academic discourses and museum practices.

The orientation, inherent need, and future potential of this landmark initiative was outlined succinctly in Clare Harris’s keynote speech, which reflected on her extensive twenty years (or more) of working with Tibetan material culture. While emphasizing an ethically engaged form of scholarship, she highlighted the importance of remarkable Tibetan individuals who have played a seminal and even formative role in her career. Harris also touched upon the frequent erasure of Tibetans from records and object histories. This remark was a crucial acknowledgment, as even to this day there has been a lack of tangible engagement between Tibetan art in Euro-American museums and the Tibetan community, barring a few recent initiatives. I wonder if this acute lack of engagement is predicated on a presumption that Tibetans are not cognizant of this phenomenon and hence unable to participate in the discourse.

Following the keynote speech, the seminar program was divided according to the proposed approaches of Knowledge Production, Knowledge Recovery, and Knowledge Loss. In this regard, the presentations cognizantly aligned with each other,

highlighting the various vantage points in the formation of Tibet/Himalayan collections in museums across Europe. The seminar was able to delineate the various nature(s) of collecting associated with pan-Tibetan material culture, seeking to unpack the notion of collector and what constitutes active, passive, semi-conscious collecting (exhibited by Heinrich Harrer) or even ambivalent ‘non-collecting’ (exhibited by Percy Powell-Cotton). Contentious issues were raised in this matter; unpacking the legacy of seminal Tibetologists as Dr. Lewis Doney (British Museum) highlighted the lapses in Hugh E. Richardson’s documentation which was coloured by a religious lens and was not strictly art historical. The cumulative deconstruction of collection/collector histories was necessary in order to begin addressing and accommodating the historical processes which led to the making of pan-Tibetan collections in Euro-American museums.

In the Knowledge Production panel, Martina Wernsdörfer (Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich) remarked on material culture as a process which constitutes unpacking complex processes of an object (such as functional, social, material, technical, etc.) and spoke about the comparative lack of visibility of material objects not deemed ‘exotic,’ or those that were non-religious and not tantric. This in particular is relevant to Tibetan objects; while Tibet was previously viewed as a large repository of antiquities, the criterion for acquisition of objects into museums was determined similarly, mainly being esoteric objects with intrinsic visual performativity. As demonstrated by John Clarke’s (Victoria & Albert Museum) research paper, only those Tibetan objects

which were deemed as 'novel' and of 'high artistic merit' entered the South Kensington Museum's collection (the precursor to the present Victoria & Albert Museum). This approach to archival research is essential in reorienting the discipline, as Martin also stressed through the concept of 'Object Itinerary,' which is a more nuanced concept than provenance in tracing the locus of objects. And this tracing of an itinerary rather than a single point of origin from a point of departure would aid us in recovering its 'lost' memories. The last panelists, Zeitzen and Brox, addressed the need for collaborative research as a means to recover displaced knowledge, having adopted it as an approach for their ongoing project working with the Prince Peter's Tibetan Collection at the National Museum of Denmark.

Among the issues highlighted, it was evident that the dichotomy of 'authentic' versus the 'inauthentic' Tibetan object was set when colonial antiquarians such as Lawrence Austine Waddell (1854–1938) privileged the forced extraction of Tibetan objects from places of worship over 'curios' amply available for a price in the Tibetan markets of Darjeeling. So, in essence, Tibetans were often just reduced to facilitators who helped access Tibetan objects and later acted as the guides or 'Sherpas' to their material culture, functioning as conduits of indigenous Tibetan knowledge and language systems. Unless there is an active effort to counter this tendency on the part of researchers, the academic associations and networks will continue to function in a manner akin to the colonial paradigms which privileged the association of British Frontier Officers with Tibetan aristocratic or religious elites. In this regard, a more grassroots approach could potentially be formulated in the future iterations of this seminar

so that, in the end, this network and its discourse do not exclude Tibetan voices and audiences, and can set a new precedent in promoting an engagement between Tibetan material culture and the Tibetan community in the museum as an institutionalized practice.

Invocation of the past and simulation and reconstruction of the 'ancient' still constitute the representational dynamics in present museum displays and exhibitions. In academia and museological discourse, there is an implied assumption that Tibet and its culture are relatively immune from Orientalist discourse but a post-colonial investigation of representational practices in the Tibetan context is urgently required (Tsering Shakya. 2001. "Who Are the Prisoners?". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 69 (1): 183–189). This, coupled with outlining a broad framework of engagement, will ensure that the participating museums become sites of articulation for the indigenous Tibetan community and a focal point for the transmission of dissipating cultural traditions, imbuing new life into the Tibetan objects in their current afterlives in museum collections. Particularly in light of the contentious origins of the major Tibet collections, there is an intrinsic need of curators of Tibetan art to acknowledge the need to involve the Tibetan community rather than engaging in tokenistic and exploitative measures which often involve key religious figures or cultural spectacles (such as sand *mandalas*). The Object Lessons from Tibet initiative has the potential to become a network which can work towards the complete dismantling of colonial legacies in the current power relationship and a platform where the aspirations of both dominant and subaltern populations can be

articulated along through a spectrum of narratives, perspectives, and knowledge-systems (James Clifford. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 188–219).

Thupten Kelsang
SOAS, University of London