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Methodological Comments Regarding Recent Research on Tibetan Art*

In the last two decades the cause of the Tibetans and their culture have received unprecedented attention in Western society. Tibet is frequently mentioned and the Dalai Lama, one of the highest spiritual authorities of the dGe lugs pa school, is among the most renowned personalities world-wide. In the wake of this publicity Tibetan art, too, received wide attention, particularly portable art such as bronze sculptures and scroll-paintings, the so-called thangkas. In the nineties several major exhibitions were dedicated to Tibetan art (Bazzeato Deotto 1999; Essen 1990; Kossak 1998; Leidy 1997; Rhie 1991, 1999; Weldon 1999) and in the Asian art market, too, Tibetan art has taken a respectable place. The recent attention regarding Tibet parallels the opening of regions of Tibetan culture. Ladakh has been open since 1974 and restricted areas of Tibet since 1980. Only then research had again become possible in the Himalayan regions. Subsequently, more and more monuments and cultural artefacts have become known.

Today we know that on the basis of the bronzes collected in three rooms within the Potala Palace alone the history of Indian and Tibetan metal sculpture could partly be rewritten if they were accessible to research.[1] Similarly, early textiles of Central Asia and China which have been preserved in Tibet currently revolutionize our knowledge about the trade of textiles and their production in the countries neighbouring

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* A review article of: Amy Heller, *Tibetan Art*. Tracing the Development of Spiritual Ideals and Art in Tibet 600-2000 A.D. Milano: Jaca Book, 1999. 240p., 112 colour plates (ISBN 88-16-69004-6). – This view on methodology has been initiated by an invitation to the tenth Austrian "Kunsthistorikertag", where I was asked to introduce the study of Tibetan art to art historians working on Western art (Luczanits 2000). My own research activities, on which these observations are based, are generously funded by the Austrian "Fonds zur Förderung wissenschaftlicher Forschung" and recently by an APART grant of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. I am extremely grateful to D.E. Klimburg-Salter and the editors of the *WZKS* for their critical comments, and to A. Heller for generously approving of this article.

[1] Cf. von Schroeder 2001.

Tibet.[2] Nevertheless, mainly due to the events connected with the cultural revolution only a fraction of the monuments and artefacts preserved for centuries in Tibet have survived the last decades, and particularly those preserved in Tibet itself are hardly well documented and studied.[3] It is thus not surprising that most of the major recent publications are dedicated to objects relatively recently acquired by private collectors and museums on the art market,[4] while studies of monuments and artefacts still in their context remain in the background (Goepper 1996; Klimburg-Salter 1997; Lo Bue 1990; Ricca 1993). Consequently, the interests of the art market rule the first "scientific" publication of these objects. The main goals are thus to place the object chronologically and to identify its main subject.[5] Recently it also has been attempted to attribute a certain workmanship, the origin of the artist, to the objects.

This concentration on appearance rather than content is a major difference to European art history as a science among the humanities. This basically materialistic approach is founded in and supported by two circumstances, the concentration of many works on single objects without context and the generally poor state of documentation within Tibet. As Tibetan art history particularly on early Tibetan art is a very recent field, we are still at the stage of building a foundation for the studies of content.

This review article of Amy Heller's book on *Tibetan Art* considers the publication within the general context of recent studies on Tibetan art, and focuses rather on the general and methodological problems. Thus, most of the critical comments expressed below can well be applied to almost all the recent publications on Tibetan art, the reviewed book only provides most of the examples. Further, it needs to be stressed that I view the reviewed book as well as the comparable recent publications from a scholarly standpoint, while they were mostly meant for a general readership. In addition, I compare the state of research to research on

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[2] Cf. for example Krahl 1997, Reynolds 1997a/b, and Watt 1997, to name only a few of a huge bulk of recent publications on the early textiles.

[3] On the one hand there are relatively few scholars attempting to do research on the spot, on the other hand the circumstances to do research particularly in Tibet itself are difficult and often afford a considerable financial amount for travel and permission to document.

[4] All the major exhibitions listed in the first paragraph.

[5] Needless to say that when a market is involved in case of doubt earlier dates are preferred and any identification is better than none.

European art and its basic methodology. At the end of the review a general assessment of the recent studies on Tibetan art is attempted.

Amy Heller's *Tibetan Art* reflects the current interests in Tibetan art and the state of research. While it contains many mostly well reproduced full page colour plates dedicated to single objects from different western collections, *in situ* documentation is rare and mostly found in the small black and white reproductions accompanying the text. A main criterion for the selection of the objects appears to be their first publication. Further, a considerable number of the earliest objects have little or nothing to do with Tibetan art except by being more or less remote predecessors. In the main text the author summarises the general development of Tibetan art, while separate extensive captions are dedicated to the colour plates. The captions are focused on the main interests (basic identification, chronology, and workmanship) while in-depth analyses of any of these aspects are rare. Only rarely a thread connects the isolated objects with the general development of art in Tibet as outlined in the main text.

The main text divides the book in four sections: "The Era of the Tibetan Empire (630-850)" (p. 7-52), "The Flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet (950-1300)" (p. 53-134), "The Tibetan Renaissance (1300-1500)" (p. 135-180), and "The Era of the Dalai Lamas (1500-2000)" (p. 181-224). While the naming of the chapters is certainly open to discussion, particularly the usage of the term "renaissance" (cf. below p. 130, n. 12), the general division into these periods makes sense. Needless to say, the last three chapters partly overlap. The division further shows that despite the fact that comparatively little is preserved from the earlier periods, the main stress of the book is laid on these periods. The last five centuries are summarised on forty pages at the end of the book. In the following, each chapter is discussed separately with minor corrections to some plate and figure captions in the last paragraph.

The first section has to be confined to considerable speculation as very little is preserved that can with certainty be placed in the era and region of the Tibetan monarchy. In my opinion, only the woodcarvings of the doors on the backside flanking the Jowo (Jo bo) Chapel in the Lhasa Jokhang (figs. 19-24) can quite safely be attributed to the monarchic period, regardless whether these carvings are attributed to the founding of the temple or somewhat later. Due to their style and close connection with Indian post-Gupta aesthetics they are generally ascribed to Nepali

artists. Further, there are the well-known stone pillars bearing imperial decrees (pl. 20 and fig. 42), and a few stone carvings and sculptures in eastern Tibet attributable to the early ninth century. The latter are a special research topic of the author during the last decade (figs. 34-36, 38, 41; the Vajrasattva and the *stūpa* on figs. 39 and 40 certainly are not contemporary with the other carvings and thus do not belong to the early period). Regarding the silver vessels recently acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art (figs. 3, 13, 14) and studied by Martha Carter (1998), it has to be noted that their attribution to Tibet is a largely hypothetical one.[6] Further, it is doubtful that the excavations at Dulan, in present day Qinghai and thus at the far north-eastern border area of Tibetan culture, are representative of the imperial culture in the central regions.

But what is Tibetan art? Is it the art made by Tibetans or the art made for Tibetans? Can an imported object be considered as Tibetan art as well, and if yes under which circumstances? Upon these questions the author does not touch, leaving the reader in the unclear about the very subject of the book. In fact, in the plates of this section the author presents mainly objects attributed to Kashmir (pls. 16, 17, 18), the Gilgit region (pl. 22), Nepal (pl. 18) and Dunhuang (pl. 24) without attempting to define their relationship to Tibetan art. Here a better presentation of the few Tibetan or Tibet related artefacts of the period covered in the main text would have been preferable.

The seal on fig. 12 evidently does not depict a lion; it rather is a composite image with a lion's body and a dog's head (or a similar animal with a thin pointed head) with wings. It thus cannot be compared with the famous lions on the tombs (pl. 1), which are not winged either. On pl. 23 the female with the vase underneath the earth-touching Buddha is not a devotee, but the earth-goddess. This is clear from the fact that no legs are depicted and supports the view that the enlightenment is represented here. The second male figure may be a donor due to his kneeling posture and the peculiar headdress, but it is unclear which objects he is holding. All the *krodha* deities on pl. 24 have the same snake wrapped around their head with a knot in front from which the head of the snake projects.[7] At the bottom image, it is thus certainly not

[6] Of course, as can be seen from the engraved inscriptions, which could have been added at any time, the objects eventually have been in Tibet in the course of their history.

[7] This detail is better visible on p. 313 in Giès 1996.

the head of a mongoose, and its identification as Jambhala has thus no foundation. Further, fig. 42, the stele from gTsaṅ groṅ, certainly has not the Buddhist creed inscribed on it. As far as it is legible from the figure, it is a Tibetan text![8]

The chapter called "The Flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet (950-1300)" deals with a period that is decisive for the development of Tibetan Buddhism as evidenced today. This formative period is qualified by an extensive translation work done in close co-operation with Indian Buddhist scholars and the formulation of distinctive Tibetan interpretations of Buddhism. The art historical evidence as preserved in the monuments and the artefacts of this period in Tibet and present day Northwest India demonstrate a variety of unique stages and interpretations in this formative process. Besides the rather vague information in the indigenous historical literature and the biographies of eminent Buddhist teachers and hierarchs, the monuments and paintings of the period are the most important source for the early cultural history of Tibetan Buddhism.

Amy Heller dedicates a relatively short section to the partly exceptionally well-preserved art of Western Himalayan monuments. While it is evident that a non-specialist on that area has little means to differentiate the art of the region (too little is published yet in this regard), the attribution of Alchi and related monuments (e.g. Sumda) to the eleventh century ignores the results of recent art historical studies.[9] Of the early Central Tibetan monuments, Drathang and Shalu are presented in some detail.

Among the objects on the plates, an unusual 14 cm high burnt clay *stūpa* with heads in its windows, today part of the Pritzker collection, is particularly noteworthy. Unfortunately, the origin of the piece does not seem to be known. The author attributes the *stūpa* to Tibet or Nepal and the tenth or eleventh century. The heads in the niches (*gandharva-mukha*) are certainly unusual, if not impossible for Tibet, and may, as

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[8] Curiously enough, also Richardson 1998: 300 refers to it as the *ye dharmāḥ* verse but does not seem to have seen the pillar or a photograph of it. He further identifies the image above the text as Avalokiteśvara. The author informed me (personal communication of 17.5.2001) that the *ye dharmāḥ* verse is found on the back of the stele, and that she regrets the loss of her reference to Richardson.

[9] Cf. Goepper 1990/1996.Further evidence supporting the still not generally accepted attribution of the Alchi monuments to the twelfth and even early thirteenth centuries is provided in Luczanits 1998.

the author notes, derive from the heads in post-Gupta *gavākṣa* (cow's eye) windows, from which also isolated heads in the Licchavi period *stūpa* of Nepal stem (Slusser 1982: figs. 261, 262, 264). The faces also remind one of the rows of faces with different headdresses carved on the beams in the Lhasa Jokhang, which must have a similar function. However, the shape of the Pritzker *stūpa* is unusual. It certainly does not resemble any of the *tsha tsha* (Tibetan votive objects made of clay) I have seen in the Western Himalayan region or in the Tucci collection at the Museo Nazionale d'Arte Orientale in Rome. In fact, in contrast to a regular *tsha tsha* the production of this object could not have been achieved with a single mould. Instead, each side must have been made with a separate mould. The *stūpa* further appears to be of burned clay (terracotta), which has hardly been used in Tibet[10] but in regions with more rain. An Indian origin and possibly also a slightly earlier date for the object thus appear favourable.[11]

Although not specifically said anywhere, the period of section three covers the consolidation of Tibetan Buddhism. Deprived of the continuous stream of influence from India, Tibetan Buddhist literature and art became systematised and canonised. Why this phase has been called a "renaissance" is thus completely unclear and not explained.[12] Shalu, Gyantse and the role of Newar artists in Central Tibetan art are the main topics of this chapter.

The major role Newar artists play in Tibetan art is evident throughout the ages. However, there are numerous nuances and shades of this Newar art and its influence evident in Tibet. In fact, only relatively little work has been done to differentiate these shades of influence by comparing Tibetan painting with extant Newar thangka painting.[13] Another important aspect is to what degree this particular art is restricted to a Tibetan Buddhist context only. In other words, what exactly is the role of the Tibetan Buddhists in the formulation of their

[10] Besides the fact that rain is scarce in Tibet and *tsha tsha* deposits are generally covered, wood is just too valuable in Tibet to be used for burning the *tsha tsha*.

[11] Dating the object will only become possible when comparably shaped *stūpa*s with two levels at the main windows and three at the side-windows will have been found.

[12] In using this term Amy Heller apparently follows an article of V. Reynolds on fifteenth century Tibetan painting (cf. p. 180, n. 36). However, this article has not been included in the bibliography and apparently has reached the author by personal communication (cf. the date).

[13] First attempts have been made e.g. by Béguin (1977/1993).

artistic heritage? Is it for example correct to call the Lori *stūpa* paintings simply Newar art or does one have to consider a Tibetan element in it deriving from the fact that its content is purely that of the esoteric Buddhism practised in Tibet? Amy Heller mentions for example that the Garuḍa depicted there is of the Tibetan kind (p. 139).

Despite internal political struggles, the thirteenth and fourteenth century were a period of extreme creativity on the side of the Tibetans. There is not a single painting or monument where the effort in systematising the complex world of Tibetan Buddhism is not visible. The stress on the lineage, on the authoritative derivation of a teaching practised by the Tibetans, is only one of the major aspects of these efforts visible in the art of the period.

Pl. 55, for example, is solely dedicated to such a lineage, centred on four teachers. Among the smaller figures Vajrasattva in the top centre, Marpa and Milarepa (Mi la ras pa) flanking the bottom teachers are clearly recognisable, the latter by their distinctive dress. The *siddha* in the top row are thus to be identified as Tilopa and Naropa, and the bottom centre figure, a teaching person with a pointed yellow hat, as Gampopa (sGam po pa). With Vajrasattva instead of Vajradhara heading the lineage the central figures most probably represent the transmission of a teaching deriving from the bKa' brgyud tradition, but are not necessarily all bKa' brgyud. The upper left figure is likely to be Phag mo gru pa (1110-1170), but the identification of the other figures without knowing the teaching involved is purely speculative. However, despite the fact that already more than a decade ago David Jackson (1986/1990) has tried to make scholars aware that numerous teaching traditions represented in the paintings are recorded in the literature, art historians largely ignore this fact. Of course, in the absence of inscriptions, as the ones Jackson has studied, the effort of identifying such a lineage is extreme and often in vain.

Particularly noteworthy among the plates belonging to this section is the perfect way of publishing the fine Ṣaḍakṣaralokeśvara from the Fournier donation to the Musée Guimet (MA 5177) with even a full colour plate showing it from the backside (pls. 57, 59, 60). Also the thangka dedicated to Bu ston, his pupil and his life and the very similar sculpture of Bu ston are remarkable.

Considering that most of what is known of Tibetan art stems from the last five centuries the fourth section dedicated to the era of the Dalai Lamas is much too short for an introduction to Tibetan art. For this

period David Jackson's fundamental study *A History of Tibetan Painting* has made an extensive amount of Tibetan literary material on Tibetan art more easily accessible (Jackson 1996). Naturally, Heller could only introduce a fraction of the different painting and sculpture traditions. Regarding the different painting styles described and named in Tibetan literature, it has to be noted that these are not styles in the western art historical sense. Names like mKhyen ris, sMan ris and Karma sgar bris, to name only the ones Heller introduces, rather refer to painting traditions, which alter considerable through time, and as Jackson's examples show, also influence each other considerably. In addition to the introduction of new styles and their continuing alteration older paintings continued to be copied as pls. 103 and 104 show. To correlate the huge amount of thangka paintings of this last period spread all over the world and published in one or another way with the different painting traditions known from Tibetan literary sources will certainly still need many specialised studies.

Trying to pack a lot of information into the first paragraphs, the last chapter commences poorly. From the way it is formulated, it appears that the author is of the opinion that the internal rivalries between eastern Tibet and the dGe lugs pa centre resulted in regional fragmentation that "culminated in the Chinese occupation of eastern Tibet in 1950 and the Lhasa uprising of 1959" (p. 181). This certainly is farfetched and oversimplified, but the author presents a much more differentiated opinion towards the end of the chapter (p. 219-223).

Regarding the figure descriptions, the Vairocana from the White Temple of Tsaparang on fig. 118 is, of course, not of stucco, but of clay. The captions for figs. 120-122 could be more precise as these three pictures from the life of the Buddha are clearly identifiable. The uppermost detail shows Sujātā preparing the milk rice for the Buddha, the bottom one shows the defeat of Māra and thus the enlightenment. The middle picture shows an event after enlightenment, namely the refutation of the heretics at Śrāvastī.

Methodologically the main text is problematic in several aspects. As mentioned already, the subject of the book is never defined. Further, the author usually does not differentiate between facts, results of research, and opinions (conclusions from experience) and the many nuances in-between. Mostly the text proceeds as if facts are presented and it is not indicated at all in which cases considerable research has been done. Similarly the text of the author often remains imprecise. In some

cases conclusions from a single place or area are generalised as valid for all of Tibet (e.g. the excavations of Dulan or the situation of West Tibet). In others the general view obscures important details (e.g. the fact that the Tabo *vajradhātumaṇḍala* varies considerably from what is to be expected from the texts and later artistic traditions). This may be considered not very important for the general reader (although in my opinion it cannot be wrong to inform him of the current state of research and knowledge) but makes it more difficult for specialists to evaluate the presented opinion.

Considering the huge amount of only recently accessible artistic and archaeological material it is evident that the author has taken on a very difficult task in writing a general book about Tibetan art and its development. Amy Heller has certainly made a huge effort to present a vast material as comprehensively as possible, including some of the newest research. The considerable number of minor mistakes (I only noted the ones in the captions to the figures and some plates) and the imprecision in the text could certainly have been reduced by another expert reading through the book before publication.[14] This should, however, be in the responsibility of the publisher.

The publisher has taken a lot of effort to show the objects on the colour plates in their best light, but also allowed considerable lapses. Of the plates pl. 11, showing Tsaparang, appears highly unnatural and pl. 79 is somehow badly printed in my copy of the book. The figures are often not sharp and sometimes evidently have been wrongly printed from a digitised image (figs. 48, 50, 51, 58, 59, 65-68, 69, 70, 76, 83-86, 89-90, 95, 101, 102). This is particular unfortunate as some of the pictures are already very small. Very odd are fig. 107, where a part of the image has apparently been removed, and fig. 123.

I have already noted (p. 126, above) that recent studies on Tibetan art solely concentrate on three aspects of the paintings, sculptures and monuments: chronology, basic identification, and the origin of the artist. Of these chronology is of imminent importance for the art market, as particularly with early objects the age dictates the price. However, as most of the studies hitherto published must at least to some extent be considered as work in progress, the opinions of different scholars alter considerably with regard to chronology. A rather extreme example is

[14] The necessity for a better readership was also noted by another reviewer of the book (see Selig Brown 2000).

the fact that in *Sacred Visions* (Kossak 1998), where many of the earliest thangkas are published for the first time, the two authors could not compromise on one chronological hypothesis for dating the objects. Thus, the objects are dated and arranged according to the two chronologies of the authors, of which neither one is explained anywhere, resulting in a rather confused picture of the early mediaeval development of Tibetan art. On this uncertain ground Amy Heller tries to compromise in both her outline and the captions to the colour plates, although, as is common, when in doubt favouring an early date. As also habitual in the field, reasons for attributing an object to a particular time and region are generally given in a vague way only. Although I am generally of the opinion that it is not worthwhile to quarrel about dates without doing a proper detailed study, two attributions in Amy Heller's book need to be discussed in more detail.

Pl. 15 shows the painted inner side of a book cover from a Prajñāpāramitā manuscript, which is attributed to the late eleventh to twelfth century, a period in which the contacts to India where still alive. This attribution is based on the scroll pattern with large leave tendrils and the shape of the Buddha's *uṣṇīṣa*. Further it is said that the painting is based on Pāla vocabulary. The latter is true, but in the painting most of that vocabulary is already completely misunderstood. The painting on the cover is relatively coarse, simple and schematic. One may just look at the main image of Prajñāpāramitā which is represented like a male image with two circles indicating the breasts. The structure of her throne, a mixture between a frame and a throne-back with the rather grotesque *makara* and *kīrtimukha* and a completely misunderstood scroll in-between, further indicate that the painter was not very experienced and probably worked from a model. Equally the edges of the throne backs of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, represented to the sides, are drawn as high pointed triangles of purely ornamental function. Neither of these features conforms to the figures cited as comparisons (figs. 79, 81, and 76 *bis*), and the peculiar pointed shape of the *uṣṇīṣa* continues to be used much later as well (cf. pls. 56, 58, 67). In fact, pl. 67 attributed to the second half of the thirteenth or early fourteenth century may rather be compared with the book cover as it also shares the elongated points of the crowns, the peculiar double line under the breast, and the more decorative throne edges behind the Buddhas. Further I would like to point out two peculiarities of the book cover, the two small goddesses, apparently holding a cup, in the circular clouds above the main image and the alternating background behind the sec-

ondary images. Neither of these is characteristic for early painting but only occurs in the thirteenth century at the very earliest (cf. particularly Kossak 1998: no. 35). The book cover thus is rather to be attributed to the late thirteenth or fourteenth century at the earliest.

Pl. 16 shows a previously unpublished object from a private collection, the fragmentary remain of a throne-back with halo (and not a *toraṇa*) once placed behind a main image, presumably a seated Buddha. A comparable piece with a throne-back of similar shape is found in the collection of H. Ellsworth.[15] Of the two female devotees once flanking the main image only the left remains. The 22 cm high fragment is attributed to seventh-century Kashmir,[16] the author noting only that the Kashmiri sculptures of that century "are somewhat more diminutive than sculptures of the eight to ninth centuries". In addition, the pose of the devotee with quite extreme bends at the hip and neck is considered a feature of early Kashmiri art. Despite the efforts of Pal 1975, von Schroeder 1981, and Paul 1986, to name only the most comprehensive, the question of the chronology of Kashmiri bronzes is far from being satisfactorily solved. Dating an object of this area thus always is a difficult task. However, no scholar has ever assigned an object comparable to the one under discussion to such an early date. In fact, when one compares this frame to the one of the Ellsworth collection image, which von Schroeder attributes to 850-950 and Pal to the ninth century, there are considerable differences that point towards a later date for the piece under discussion. The *stūpa* on top is elongated and projects much further beyond the light rays framing the halo circle. Flowers within the halo circle became fashionable in eastern Indian bronzes from the ninth century onward and are unusual in bronzes of the Northwest. Two pillars are added to the throne back, again an element much more common in eastern Indian bronzes and used there from the ninth century onward. The shape of the pillars is rather northwestern and occurs there mainly in the frames of images from the eighth century onwards. Early examples of pillars, as the ones of Avantipur, are extremely decorated, while the ones on the bronze under discussion are plain and rather remind one of the pillars framing the clay sculptures at Alchi and Mangyu. The marked *tribhaṅga* posture of the female devotee is not at all an indication of an early date (I actually do not

[15] Formerly in the Pan-Asian collection (Pal 1975: fig. 75; Reedy 1997: P23; von Schroeder 1981: 12E).

[16] On top of the caption even the sixth century is considered.

remember a sixth or seventh century image with that feature) but again is rather common with later images.[17] Remarkably the scarf of the goddess has two different ends, one split in the middle and one rounded. The same two shapes have been used for the scarf-ends of the Tabo clay images in the middle of the eleventh century. For all these reasons I would not date this frame earlier than to the tenth century.

The main problem regarding the chronology is the method of stylistic comparison used for Tibetan art. When compared to western art history it is evident that for Tibetan art stylistic comparisons are only drawn in a rather rudimentary fashion. Earlier, and influenced by the optimistic title, I considered the symposium "Towards a Definition of Style" as the turning point from connoisseurship to art historical expertise proper. However, the resulting publication (Singer 1997) is far from even approaching the laying of a foundation for the study of style in Tibetan art. The catalogue *Sacred Visions*, published a few years later and limited to a restricted period and geographic area, first of all suffers from the absence of properly founded stylistic analyses of early Tibetan thangkas, particularly the sTag luṅ paintings. The comparatively large number of paintings belonging to or related to the sTag luṅ school would definitely allow for the construction of a first, well-founded, and comprehensive basis for the stylistic development and relationship of early Tibetan paintings. However, despite promising beginnings this work has not yet been achieved.[18]

Similarly, the iconographic analysis of paintings, sculptures and monuments is still in its infancy. While in general at least the main images are reliably identified, the surrounding figures are usually not discussed in detail. For example, the thangka in pl. 58 evidently shows a kind of paradise-scene that in variations often occurs in the thirteenth and fourteenth century murals of Ladakh. Still, I have not found a conclusive iconographic clue for this theme. The identification of the main image of such a painting, in this case the Buddha is identified as Mahāvairocana, remains purely hypothetical as long as the peculiar context of the main image is not explained. Further, Tibetan art always has been an expression of the highly innovative

[17] The change in the posture of secondary figures can best be seen with the figures accompanying the many Kashmiri representations of the four-armed Viṣṇu.

[18] As a first attempt to differentiate a particular school of early Tibetan painting Eva Allinger's work (Allinger 1998/1999) is particularly noteworthy in this regard.

nature of Tibetan Buddhism and its many traditions.[19] This is particularly evident in early Tibetan art which preserves numerous peculiar iconographies not explainable from the perspective of the present traditions alone.

In addition, most of the paintings or sculptures never were intended as isolated objects, but have originally been conceived as part of a larger series. In many cases the iconography of such images can only be understood if this fact is taken under consideration. This is, of course, obvious when a thangka represents one of the five *tathāgatas*, as on pl. 68, but even in such a case there are several possibilities the paintings can relate to each other. The best examples in this regard are provided by *Sacred Visions*, where quite a few thangkas are dedicated to the five *tathāgatas* (Kossak 1998: nos. 1, 4, 13, 23a-c, 25, 28, 36a-c). While in several of these examples the secondary Bodhisattvas are displayed symmetrically with only the standing figures individualised (e.g. in the nos. 1, 13, 23a-c, 25), in other cases they clearly convey a more specific iconographic meaning.

The identification and interpretation of painting no. 28 in *Sacred Visions* (Kossak 1998: 119-121) most clearly demonstrates the problem when one solely concentrates on the main image and interprets it from the perspective of later painting. Steven Kossak identifies this thangka as Amitāyus surrounded by the Eight Bodhisattvas.[20] Instead, the central Amitābha is flanked by two groups of four Bodhisattvas, each clearly differentiated by a distinctive attribute and colour. The four Bodhisattvas flanking the main image are (read clockwise from the lower left Bodhisattva) Vajradharma, white, opening the petals of a red lotus at his heart, Vajratīkṣṇa, blue like heaven, holding a sword in the right hand, Vajrahetu, of golden colour, turning a wheel on the tip of

[19] Cf. Jackson 1996: chapter 14 for examples of such innovations.

[20] Interestingly, the clearly individualised secondary Bodhisattvas have apparently provoked the identification of the main image of the thangka as Amitāyus and not as Amitābha as one of the five *tathāgatas*. Amitāyus and Amitābha are confused in later Tibetan art where images holding a vase are considered representations of Amitābha as well (but not vice versa). Such confusion cannot be expected for the early art as well, and even if one expects it, there is no reason for identifying the main image as Amitāyus as he simply does not hold a vase in his hands. Furthermore, the surrounding Bodhisattvas are not the group of Eight Bodhisattvas, the identification of which did not work out anyway (cf. e.g. the identification of "Vajrapani as Ratnapani (moon on the lotus)" in Kossak 1998: 120).

the middle-finger, and Vajrabhāṣa, red, holding a *vajra*-tongue (*rdo rje lce*) with the right hand. The four Bodhisattvas in the back flanking the head of the main image are (read from left to right) Amṛtaprabha, white, holding a vase of *amṛta*, Candraprabha, white, holding a lotus with a crescent on top, Bhadrapāla, white, holding a flaming jewel, and Jālinīprabha, red, with a *vajra*-net in his hands. These are the western Bodhisattvas of a variant of the *vajradhātumaṇḍala*. In the *maṇḍala* the first group immediately surrounds Amitābha, while the second group occupies the western quarter of the following circle as a part of the sixteen Bodhisattvas. Consequently the position in front of Amitābha, between the peacocks of the throne, is occupied by the female form of Vajrasphoṭa, the gate-keeper of the west (red, holding a chain).[21] The thangka thus has once definitely been one of a group of at least five paintings centred on an image of Vairocana and represents the western quarter. How the remaining figures of the painting are related to the central group and the whole cycle still needs to be analysed.

Similarly, the *Sacred Vision* paintings no. 4 and 36a-c and Heller's pl. 68 contain individualised secondary Bodhisattvas to be analysed in detail. The latter painting could again be a part of a *vajradhātumaṇḍala*, but its individual images are not all clearly identifiable.[22] To complicate matters, the two partial groups published in *Sacred Visions*, nos. 23a-c and 36a-c, show that the representations of the protective deities in the bottom row of the paintings have to be read together. Consequently, the practitioner of the represented teaching (*sādhaka*) is only represented on one of the paintings of each group.

Considering all these aspects, it is to be expected that future research will reveal a huge number of iconographic varieties. Only a complete iconographic analysis of the paintings will once disclose their purpose and function, and allow us to understand the paintings better.

The third common main topic, the question of the origin of the artist, mainly derives from the fact that early Tibetan art is generally consid-

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[21] This goddess has been identified as goddess Kalo by the author without telling us anything about this deity (Kossak 1998: 120).

[22] The protector of the south, the yellow Vajrapāśa holding a noose is represented on the throne underneath the main image, but only some of the surrounding Bodhisattvas conform to the deities of the *maṇḍala*. In addition, the upper four Bodhisattvas appear to hold the same attributes, some disk in the raised right hand and a bell in the left at the hip. The two goddesses would have to be identified as Vajramālā (left) and Vajralāsyā.

ered as being of foreign origin. Consequently, David Jackson summarises in his *History of Tibetan Painting* the current opinion in the following way:

> Both Tibetan and Western scholarship generally agree in discerning two main stages in the development of Tibetan Buddhist painting: first, the initial introduction of foreign – mainly Indian – styles, and second, the subsequent realization of distinctively Tibetan styles, which incorporated progressively more Chinese influences.

According to him the second phase begins in the early fifteenth century (Jackson 1996: 69).[23] Considering the high number of early temples, paintings and artefacts that have become known recently, this view certainly will be differentiated in the future because many artistic schools, although deriving originally from India or Nepal, had established themselves in Tibet already for centuries. At another place (1996: 48-51), Jackson quotes the most extensive Tibetan description of traditional Tibetan painting styles by De'u dmar *dge bśes* bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs (presumably born in 1665; the text has been written around 1720) in which for the earliest Tibetan painting, too, the author differentiates between foreign painting styles and Tibetan painting styles which derive from the foreign styles. Such a conception appears to be much more approximate to reality.

One may just consider the diverse early mural painting styles in the Western Himalayas as examples. The Tabo renovation paintings and sculptures were certainly created by an Indian art school. However, this style continued to be used for at least 150 years (the Dunkar caves) and even influenced the fifteenth and sixteenth century art of Guge strongly (cf. Klimburg-Salter 1997: chapter 6). Thus, the style evidently has been taken over by Tibetan masters, or the originally foreign masters were integrated into Tibetan society. In contrast, the peculiar style of the Alchi group of monuments is restricted to a narrow time frame and geographic region. It thus represents a foreign (most probably Kashmiri) style that was not taken over by the Tibetans, but replaced by other styles in the course of the thirteenth century. In the late thirteenth century a local Ladakhi painting style deriving from twelfth and thirteenth century Central Tibetan painting was developed and consequently used in almost all fourteenth century foundations in lower

[23] Interestingly, this summary is contradicted by Jackson's references on the same page according to which many early Tibetan religious masters are said to have been painters themselves.

Ladakh (e.g. Wanla and the lHa khaṅ So ma in Alchi).[24] Regarding the relationship of Central Tibetan and Nepalese painting I have already expressed a more differentiated opinion above (cf. p. 130-131).

Further, the style, or rather the manner or tradition in which a painting was made, cannot be the only criteria for determining the origin of its painter. It is well known that good artists could paint or produce sculptures according to different traditions; one may only think of the different works attributed to the famous Nepalese artist Anige (cf. e.g. Jing 1994). At the current stage of research, the origin of an artist can thus be determined on the basis of more than pure speculation only if the artist is attested to otherwise (e.g. in an inscription).

Regardless whether an Indian, Nepalese, or Tibetan made an object, it was created for a Tibetan to express his intimate relationship with what is represented. This Tibetan donor certainly had a considerable influence on the way a deity or thangka was represented. However, this contribution of Tibetans to their art preserved in their country is hardly a topic in publications on Tibetan art. At any rate, only a properly founded analysis of a painting or object in all its aspects will allow future less speculative statements about the origin of an object, its intentions, and the artist who made it.

The work of an art historian within the humanistic disciplines has beautifully been summarised by Erwin Panofsky in the following way (Panofsky 1955: 17-18):

> He [the art historian] *knows* that his cultural equipment, such as it is, would not be in harmony with that of people in another land and of a different period. He tries, therefore, to make adjustments by learning as much as he possibly can of the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created. Not only will he collect and verify all the available factual information as to medium, condition, age, authorship, destination, etc., but he will also compare the works with others of its class, and will examine such writings as reflect the aesthetic standards of its country and age, in order to achieve a more "objective" appraisal of its quality. He will read old books on theology or mythology in order to identify its subject matter, and he will further try to determine its historical locus, and to separate the individual contribution of its maker from that of forerunners and contemporaries. He will study the formal principles that control the rendering of the visible world, or, in architecture, the handling of what may be called the structural features, and

[24] For a more detailed analyses of this change in painting style apparent in the thirteenth century cf. Luczanits 1998.

> thus build up a history of "motifs". He will observe the interplay between the influences of literary sources and the effect of self-dependent representational traditions, in order to establish a history of iconographic formulae or "types". And he will do his best to familiarise himself with the social, religious and philosophical attitudes of other periods and countries, in order to correct his own subjective feeling for content. But when he does all this, his aesthetic perception as such will change accordingly, and will more and more adapt itself to the original "intention" of the works. Thus, what the art historian, as opposed to the "naïve" art lover, does, is not to erect a rational superstructure on an irrational foundation, but to develop his re-creative experiences so as to conform with the results of his archaeological research, while continually checking the results of his archaeological research against the evidence of his re-creative experiences.

Considering this summary, Tibetan art history probably has not even yet begun.

Amy Heller's book as well as *Sacred Visions* and other recent publications greatly assist future studies in making accessible many hitherto unpublished works often housed in private collections. However, a careful analysis of the published paintings will never be possible on the basis of publications alone, as the iconographic details of the secondary images are hardly visible and inscriptions identifying secondary images are often not published (cf. pls. 103 and 104).[25] Even less attention is given to other inscriptions, such as the consecration *mantra* on the back of a thangka. This is, of course, a great pity because in this way a huge amount of additional information on the painting does not become available. Certainly, such information is only of interest to the specialist, but its collection in an appendix would be completely sufficient.[26] In addition, there are many early works, particularly less well-preserved ones, which have not yet been published at all and will probably never be published.

At Vienna University we have built up an archive concentrated on early Western Himalayan art which, thanks to the generosity of Jaroslav Poncar and Roger Goepper, now also contains the Alchi documentation.

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[25] In other cases Amy Heller does provide transcriptions of the inscriptions (pls. 57 and 110).

[26] I am aware that in some cases the publisher or the concept of a publication may not allow the author to provide this information to the specialists in an appendix. However, the present-day media offer other low-cost forms of making it available to those interested.

Altogether approximately 40000 slides are in the "Western Himalayan Archives Vienna" (WHAV)[27] now. Similar concentrated public photographic archives on other regions or subjects, e.g. early thangkas, or Central Tibetan temples, would greatly enhance the build up of a proper art historical basis for early Tibetan art. Another method of publishing the pictorial material in a way that all information is available is now successfully demonstrated by the web site of the Rubin collection (http://www.himalayanart.org/).[28] Only such comprehensive documentation efforts, which enable the scholar to extract all possible information of a painting or object, will allow one in future to overcome the present limitations in the study of Tibetan art. Only then Tibetan art history commences.

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[27] This is the name of the archives we have recently introduced to refer to the archives in future.

[28] In this web site thangkas are made available in an exceptionally comprehensive way by allowing one to zoom into painting details so that one can even read the captions oneself. In the same way the backside of each thangka can be viewed. The site even offers private collectors to have their paintings included. However, currently it is difficult, if not impossible to find a secondary deity in this huge collection without going through hundreds of them. Similarly, stylistic comparisons cannot be found there yet. Partly this is made up for by the accompanying book publication Rhie 1999.

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