

Tibetan Sculptures



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主 编：郭长建

副 主 编：雷 珈

责任编辑：荆孝敏

本册撰稿：廖东凡

翻 译：黎 阳

摄 影：张 鹰 陈宗烈 熊文彬等

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*Ten Figures in Freedom in the Joking  
Monastery (Gilded Bronze)*

# Tibetan Sculptures

By Liao Dongfan

The Tibetan sculpture are the world-famous which fall into several categories according to the raw materials used, such as the clay modeling, butter sculpture, wooden carving, stone carving and metal forming, etc. They are also containing enriched themes: such as the deity or Buddha images, dharma ritual object, offering, utility device, ornament and jewelry, and etc.

The sculptures for deity or Buddha images were introduced and developed in parallel with the introduction and development of Buddhism in Tibet. No doubt, just as the other art forms of Tibet, they have gone through the process of combining the Buddhist culture with the Tibetan one, and absorbing the exterior



Shakyamuni (Gilded Bronze)

techniques and styles to form its own, i.e. the distinctively Tibetan one.

Buddhism attaches importance on taking refuge in the Three Jewels, i.e. the state of Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. By taking refuge in the state of Buddha it needs the concrete image, namely the statue of deity or Buddha. Thus making the statue of deity or Buddha is one of the most important art forms of the Tibetan Buddhism.

The traditional Tibetan culture is generally divided into ten treasures, or the Ten Great Treasures, which include the Buddhist doctrine, the Buddhist literature, the Buddhist art, the Buddhist logic and philosophy. Among which, that for deity refers to making the deity or Buddha image through painting and sculpting.

Deity or Buddha statue in Tibet may not be made at discretion. It should follow the requirement stipulated in several chapters specifically dealing with the painting and sculpting in the Tripitaka written in Tibetan language. The Master painters and sculptors of all ages in Tibet, following the requirements and adding their own artistic creation, talent and imagination, have established their unique styles and created many treasured deity or Buddha statues.

During the reign of the King Songtsan Gampo in the 7th century, A.D, there had been the life-size bronze statue of Shakyamuni when he was 12 year's old, brought in by princess Wencheng from Chang'an; and the life-size bronze statue of Shakyamuni when he was 8 year's old, brought in by princess Bhrikuti Devi from



Katmandu. Besides, there also had been the clay stature of the God of Mercy in the Jokhang Monastery; the sandalwood stature of God of Mercy in the Potala Palace; and the stone image of Shakyamuni in the Paklha Lubuk Cave in the east side of the Chakpori Hill, which were made by the Nepalese artisans, according to Mr. Tenpa Raten, the famous Tibetan painter.

The Tibetan ancient history book, Bashed, recorded an interesting story about the initiation of making the Buddha's statue in the Samye Monastery, the earliest of its kind in Tibet. The story has it that the King Trisong Detsan (755-797 A.

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D.) had built up a tara hall but without the Buddha's image in it. Right then there came a person named Gyatsan Magyan meaning the man from chinea hinterland with a pot of pigments and a bunch of paint-brushes from afar, chanting while walking: I am the best painter and sculptor, I would like to make the Buddha's image for the king. On hearing this, the king invited him to prepare the project with the Master Padmasambhava and some Nepalese artisans. The man asked: should the image be made in Indian style or Chinese style? The master answered: Buddha was born in India, so we'd better make it in Indian style. But the king said: I hope some of my subjects who like the Bon religion would shift their belief to Buddhism, so please by all means make the Buddha look like our Tubo people. The master then agreed. Hence they gathered all subjects and picked out the most beautiful men and women as the models. The most handsome man Gui Dhatsa was imitated for the two-armed God of Mercy; the most beautiful women, Jorafe Pogyon and Jorafe Lhapomen were imitated for the Bright Goddess and the four-armed Goddess of Mercy respectively; while Jomen Yesu was imitated for the Protector of Asvaghosa.

This story proves that in Tibet there already had been its own sculptor as early as in the middle of the 8th century and the Buddha's image was made by modeling the Tibetan people.

The middle of the 11th century saw the prosperity of Tibetan Buddhism again. Many sects thus emerged and many grand monasteries were built, which needed the mantras halls and Buddha's images in

chain. That drove the business of image making to its peak. In his book Tibetan Painting, Mr. Tenpa Raten wrote that in 11th century A.D, Drom Tonpa, the founder of Tibetan Kadampa Sect, invited many Tibetan and Nepalese artisans building up a large number of holy stupas for the Kadampa in the Razheng Monastery. The master Dadegongba Cuichenbuli built up several stupas and gold or bronze images in the Natang Monastery in Tsang



*Gawu (Gold, Worn on the Chest as Symbol of Protection)*

area, the Dainsati Monastery in Shannan Prefecture, and the Chigungti Monastery in Maizhokungka County. The 2nd Karmapa living Buddha Karma Pakshi (1204-1283 A.D.), got a lot of brass and copper from the mines and invited the master sculptor Bashi building up a 15 meter high statue of Shakyamuni in the Curpu Monastery. In the beginning of the 15th century, Naiqgum, the famous living Buddha, was good at both painting

and sculpting, led many artisans building up the statue of the yidam (the meditational deity) in the Gandain Monastery and that of Yamankaka in the Drepung Monastery.

In the same period of time, in Chinese hinterland, there emerged the famous Yongle-period image making. During the reign of Yongle Emperor, there were a lot of mills making the deity or Buddha's image. The color of the bronze statues is on the white side. These well-crafted and -shaped statues can still be seen in the Potala Palace and other places in Tibet now. As the thangkas and frescos, the sculptures were also initially mixed with the Chinese inland style and Nepalese style then evolved into its own, the Tibetan style. In the 15th century, emergence of the Mentang School founded by Menla Teundrup in the region of Lhodrak; the chenzher School founded by chenzher chambo in the region of Gonggar; and later on the Kartri Schools represented by Namkar Drashi, Choskyi Drashi and Gashe Karma Drashi, marks the mature of Tibetan sculpturing and painting. The masterpieces of these schools can be still frequently seen in the Tashhilungpo Monastery in Xigaze, the Qoide Monastery in Gonggar, the Potala Palace, the Gandain Monastery, the Drepung Monastery and the Sera Monastery in Lhasa, and the monasteries in Qamdo Prefecture.

Three technologies were usually adopted to make the metal image. They are hammering, Losing-wax and die-casting. When hammering is adopted, the craftsmen draw outlines on the metal plates then shape them with hammer. For bigger statue, several components are hammered respectively then soldered together. The 26 meter high



*Vairocana Unearthed in the Toding  
Monastery in Nagri*

bronze setting statue of the Qamba Buddha in the Tsahilhungpo Monastery in Xigaze was made in this way.

The die-casting is most frequently used. The book Tibetan Religious Arts written by Zhadub Lhotonxira gives a description about it: Firstly place an image pattern in the middle of a wooden case and bury it with the earth and compact it to density. Then use a sharp knife cutting the earth into two pieces. Release the image pattern like nut in the shell. When the earth pattern dries out, pour the smelted metal liquid into it, and get the image when it is cooled down. Burnish the surface and make the details on the face, eyes and clothes with chisel. At last store it waiting for inauguration. Beside the metal one, there are also clay molding, pottering, stone curving, bone curving, and etc. There is also a special way of clay molding called Tsatsa, which can be seen everywhere in Tibet.

In the 17th century, the fifth Dalai Lama (1617 - 1682) initiated a metal mill named Shodebab under the Potala Palace, making the Buddha's images and the ritual wares commissioned by the local government. The 7th Panchan (1781 - 1853) initiated another mill named Zhaxi Jicab in Xigaze, undertaking the similar task. While in Eastern Tibet, the image making has its time honored tradition and fine workmanship. For example, in Gema village of Qamdo prefecture it has been permeated with the family mills since the 12 century.

Nowadays, The Tibetan People enjoy freedom of religious belief. Several hundred monasteries belonging to different sects are open to the public. There are also numerous small temples and family alters. Therefore the deity or Buddha images making are still very prosperous and the old artisans and their students are still very busy, who are irreplaceable in making or repairing the sculptures. The artisans from the Zhaxi Jicab Mill in Xigaze has made stupas of the successive Panchan from the 5th to 10th, showcasing their superb skills.





*Human Faced Lions (Wooden Carving,  
Said to be Made in the 7th Century A.  
D. Used for Decorating the Gates Head  
of the Jokhang Monastery)*

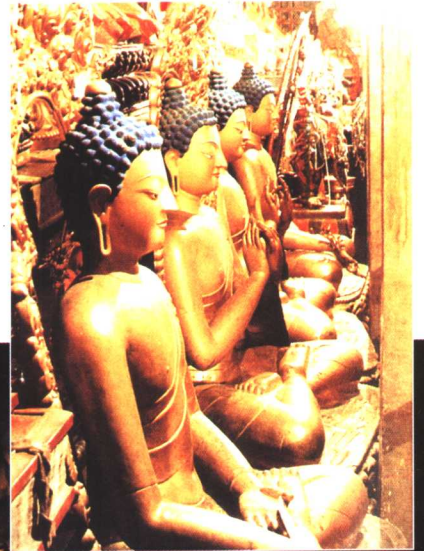




*Bull-Headed Protector in  
the Potala Palace (Clay)*



*Medicine Buddha (Bronze)*



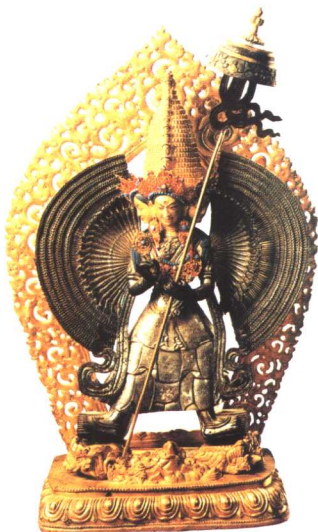
*Future Buddha in the Drepung  
Monastery (Bronze)*







*Arhats (Clay Molding)*



*Lady of the White Parasol (Silver)*

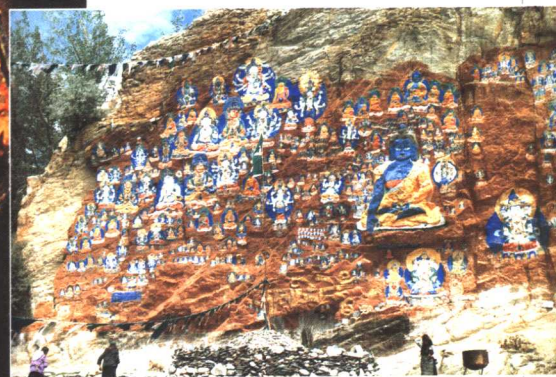


*God of Mercy (Gilded Bronze)*



*Amitabha (Crystal)*





*Cliff Curving in the Southwestern Side of Chakpori Hill in Lhasa (Work Started from the 7th Century).*

*Bodhisattva in the Palkor Monastery in Gyangze*





*Statue of Songtsan Gampo in Tubo Period*

*Statue of Princess Wencheng in Tubo Period*











*Golden Bull (Mani Stone  
curving in Lhasa)*



*Ceremonial Dagger (Qing  
Dynasty, Dharma Ware)*





*Flying Monk (Mani Stone  
Curving in Tingri County)*



*Future Buddha(Alloy)*



*Thunderbolt (Gold)*



*Bodhisattva in the Samye  
Monastery (Bronze)*

*Thunderbolt in the Sagya  
Monastery (Tsatsa)*

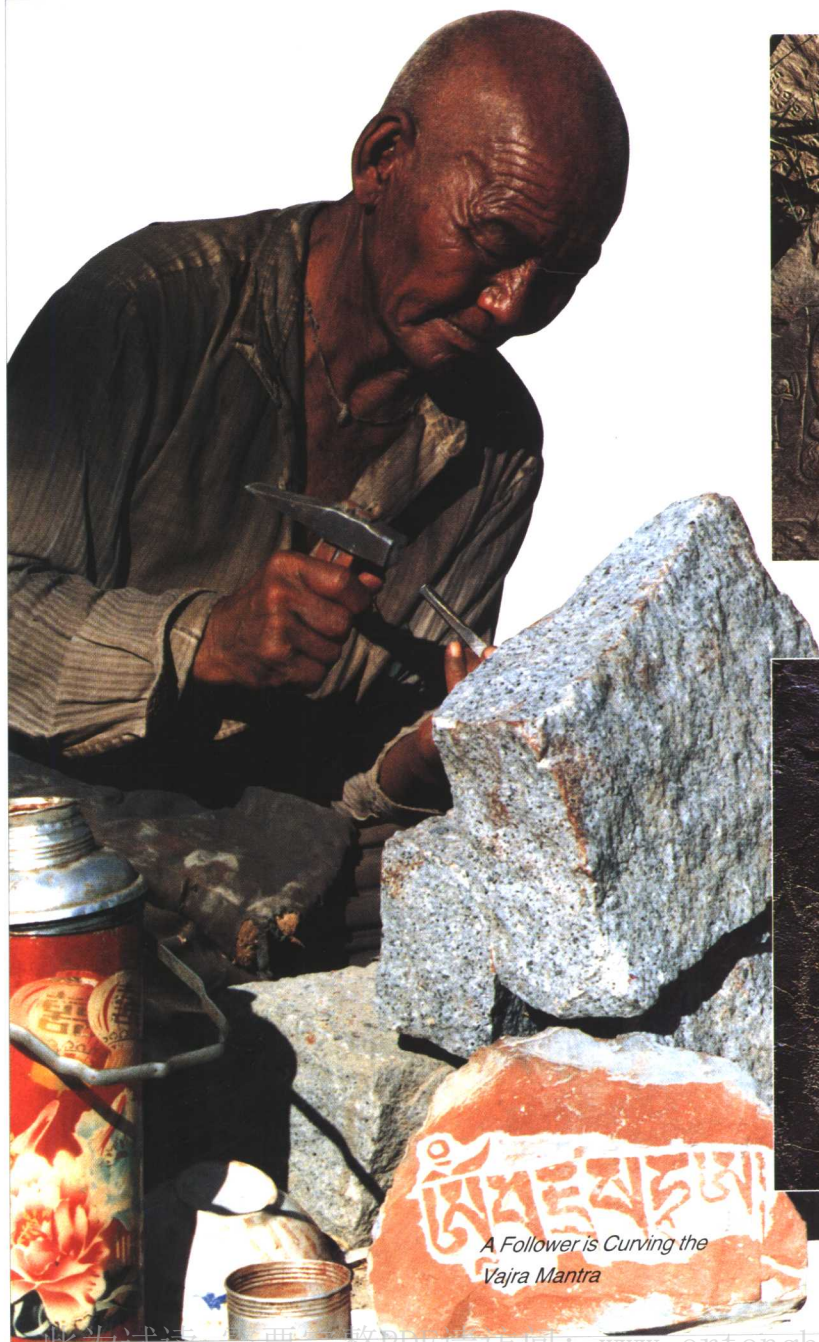


*Mahakala (Gilded Bronze)*

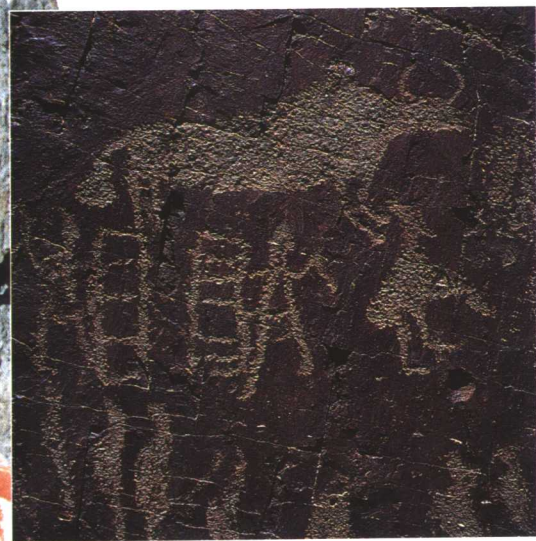


*Auspicious Goddess (Gilded Bronze)*





*Tara in the Razheng Monastery (Stone Carving)*



*Rutog Rock Painting in Nagri*

A Follower is Curving the  
Vajra Mantra