

Tibetan Frescoes



*T*ibetan *F*rescoes

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*Portrait of Sakyamuni ( Sakya Monastery )*

## 西藏系列画册

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# Tibetan Frescoes

By Liao Dongfan

The Tibetan frescoes, referred to as 'Diri' in Tibetan language, together with the thangkas (painted scrolls) are two major varieties of Tibetan traditional paintings. Compared with the thangka, the fresco is painted on wall, which allows of larger and more flexible space of painting on one hand; however, given by coarser wall surface, the painting on it will be less sophisticated and delicate on the other hand.

The colorful frescoes can be seen in almost every monastery, royal palace or castle in Tibet. The subject matters mostly were drawn from the chronology of the Tibetan kingdom, origin and development of religious sects, history of monasteries, legend, story of personage, biography of Sakyamuni and the founders of the sects. They depicted not only images of the yidams, Buddha, bodhisattvas, dakinis, guardian deities; metempsychosis, mandala, stupas and all sorts of religious figures; but also the life scenes of the lay people. On the wall of the doorway of their houses, the aristocrats, officers or rich people of the old time, more often than not, there were frescoes. It is also true to that of many local citizens today. The usual subject matters were including

the eight auspicious symbols, four concord friends, six longevity figures, a Mongolian followed by a tiger, treasures carried by an elephant, and etc. Anyway, which meant to wish and pray for good luck, gladness, concord, longevity, prosperity and richness.

Before painting, the preparation works can be divided into the following steps: The first step is to determine position of the painting and outline the borders in light of the size of the wall; The second step is to

apply a thin layer of glue with light red color, then add another layer of yellow or magenta with wish color, and then brush and level off the wall surface, making an area, called 'melon' in Tibetan meaning 'auspicious mirror'; the third step is to draw three strips on the upper part of the 'melon'. The first strip, counting from the upper, is blue, on which some scriptures or names of the bodhisattva were written both in Tibetan and in Sanskrit. The second and third strips are red and green respectively and sunblind-like, called 'fresh cloth', the width of which altogether accounts for one sixth of the total width of the area for painting. The space between the lower border and floor, called 'Garcai' meaning wainscot, also is to be decorated or painted in deep blue or dark green. Now it is ready for painting.

When painting, firstly draw the position line; secondly sketch with carbon rod and ink; thirdly paint; fourthly apply gold; fifthly draw the eyebrows and eyes; and lastly level off and polish the picture, especially the gold

and silver applied parts, with ambers, and apply some glue or fining varnish. Thus a fresco is completed.

The colophon for the fresco is more explicit than that of the thangka. It recorded the origin and content of the fresco, and every so often even the name of every figure, whoever is person or deity. The thangka and statue are mainly for believers or pilgrims to prostrate and worship, while the fresco is mainly used for recording the history, doctrine, and outstanding achievement of eminent monks and masters, kings, ministers and the concubines, so its contents are broader and more optional. The characters can be added or cut down by the painters themselves. It is said that during the maintaining period for the main hall of the Sakya Monastery in 1950, some famous artisans including the chief carpenter for this project were depicted into the fresco, in a small area at the corner though.

The fresco might emerge earlier than the thangka. The origin and development of the former are also more easily traced



Bodhisattvas ( Xalhu Monastery )



than that of the latter, for there is nothing left for thanangka of the earliest period. According to the Bibliography of Songtsan Gampo, the earliest Tibetan historic book, the king assigned in person several painters of Tibet, Han and Nepal painting a series of frescoes, including the images of the horse-necked deity, goddess of mercy and white tara, as well as the stories of Maiden Sukyi Nyima, the girl with a bell, the parrot, the monkey and bird, etc. Though the disciples of master Rume in different sects waged a number of large-scale armed fights in Jokhang Monastery causing many buildings burning black. Now we still can see some ruins of the frescoes on the north-faced wall on the second floor.

During the middle of the 8th century, A.D. Tibetan King Trisong Detsan decided to construct the Samye Monastery in Shannan. The frescoes with wide-ranged subject matters and fine craftsmanship were painted almost on any walls of the sutra hall, chapels or the corridors in it, especially in the main hall named Utse; the four larger and eight smaller halls enshrining the respective guardian kings; as well as the three chapels sponsored by the princesses. The monastery is indeed a great museum of Tibetan frescoes. Afterwards owing to movements of eliminating the Buddhism launched by the last Tubo King Lang Darma (841 - 846, also named Wudum

Tsanpo) as well as the disaster caused by accidental fires, the aboriginal frescoes of the Tubo period in the monastery suffered from serious damages. However, according to Professor Damba Roidain of Tibet University, the fresco named The



*Lhamo (Dungkar Grotto in Nagri)*

Twelve Great Manifestations is a masterpiece painted during the construction of the monastery; and the frescoes depicting scenes of drum dance, yak dance, acrobatics, horse race and etc along the left corridor of the main hall, was recorded during the inauguration ceremony of the monastery, which were damaged by accidental fires and resurrected in the 17th century. Now they serve as the precious historical materials for researching the origin and development of the Tibetan traditional sports.

From the beginning of the 10th century, Buddhism revived in the forms of two monastic traditions in Nagri and

Amdo respectively. These were termed as Upper Region Spreading and Lower Region Spreading of the Tibetan Buddhism by the historians, which also brought about opportunity to revitalize the fresco art. Till today some frescoes made in this period are still kept in such places as the ruins of Guge Kingdom, Toding Monastery, Dungkar Grotto, Xalhu Monastery and North Sakya Monastery in Xigaze, Zhatang Monastery and Sanggar Godor Monastery in Shannan, on which the blended style of Tibet with Nepal and Chinese Hinterland can be obviously seen.

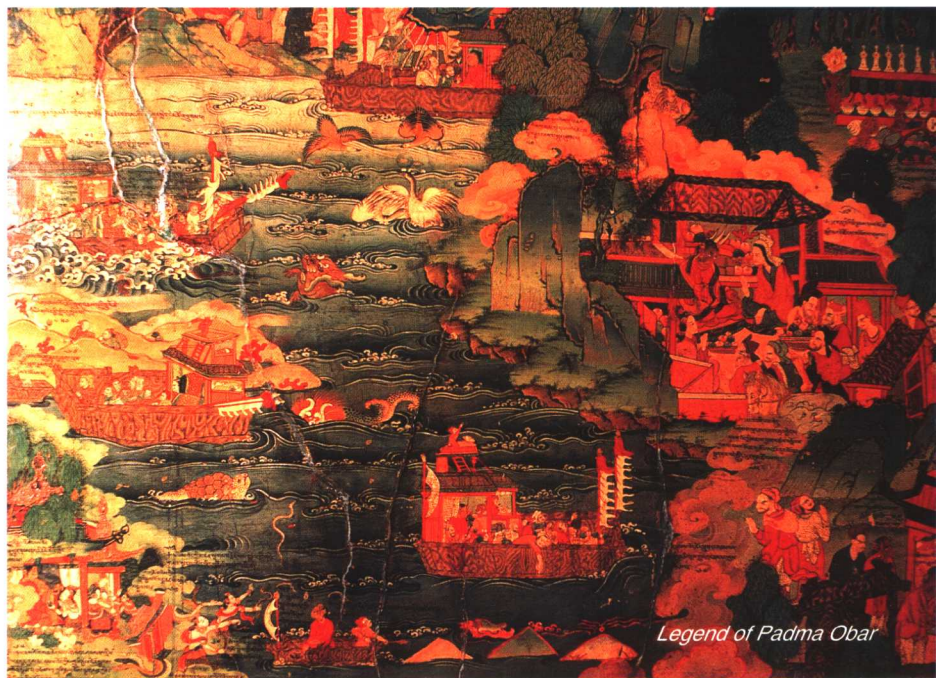
The formation, development and prosperity of the Tibetan fresco art have all along been in step with the ups and downs of the Tibetan Buddhism, and with that of the monasteries in particular. The more widely the Buddhism was spread; the more monasteries were built up and the more frescoes were required; the greater talent and more skills of the painters were explored; the more easily their unique style was formed.

These are true if we look at the Tibetan history around the 14th century. Following the completion of the Razheng Monastery and Natung Monastery of Kadampa sect; the Curpu Monastery, Chigung Monastery, Cab Monastery, Gongtung Monastery, Daglung Monastery, and Riwoqe Monastery, etc of the Kegyupa Sect; the North Sakya Monastery and Qoide Monastery of Sagyapa Sect; the



Gandain Monastery, Drepung Monastery, Sera Monastery, Tashilhunpo Monastery and Qambaling Monastery, etc of Gelugpa Sect one and another, a large quantity of frescoes were made and different schools of the fresco painting with the Tibetan aroma were established.

The three major schools founded then or later on were Mentang School, Chenzher School and Kartri School. The Mentang School was founded by the master painter Menla Teundrup in Lhozhaq, who emphasized preciseness and color harmony and good at painting the peaceful deities or Buddha. In the Tashilhunpo Monastery, there are still a great many masterpieces painted by Menla Teundrup; his son Mentangpa Jiangyang, led a team to complete the frescoes painting in Yangbajain Monastery, the residence of the Red Hat Living Buddha of the Karmapa of the Kargyu Sect; while his niece, Mentangpa Hiwawo, painted the portrait of Master Marba, which in Sanggar Godor Monastery. Chenzher School was founded by Chenzher Chanbo, who had an origin of the Chenzher Village of Gonggar, Shannan. Both Menla Teundrup and Chenzher Chanbo were the students of the master painter Dopa Tashi Gyelpo. Chenzher Chanbo liked the vigorous brush stroke and rich colors and was expert at painting the wrathful deities or yidams. The frescoes in Gonggar Dorjedain

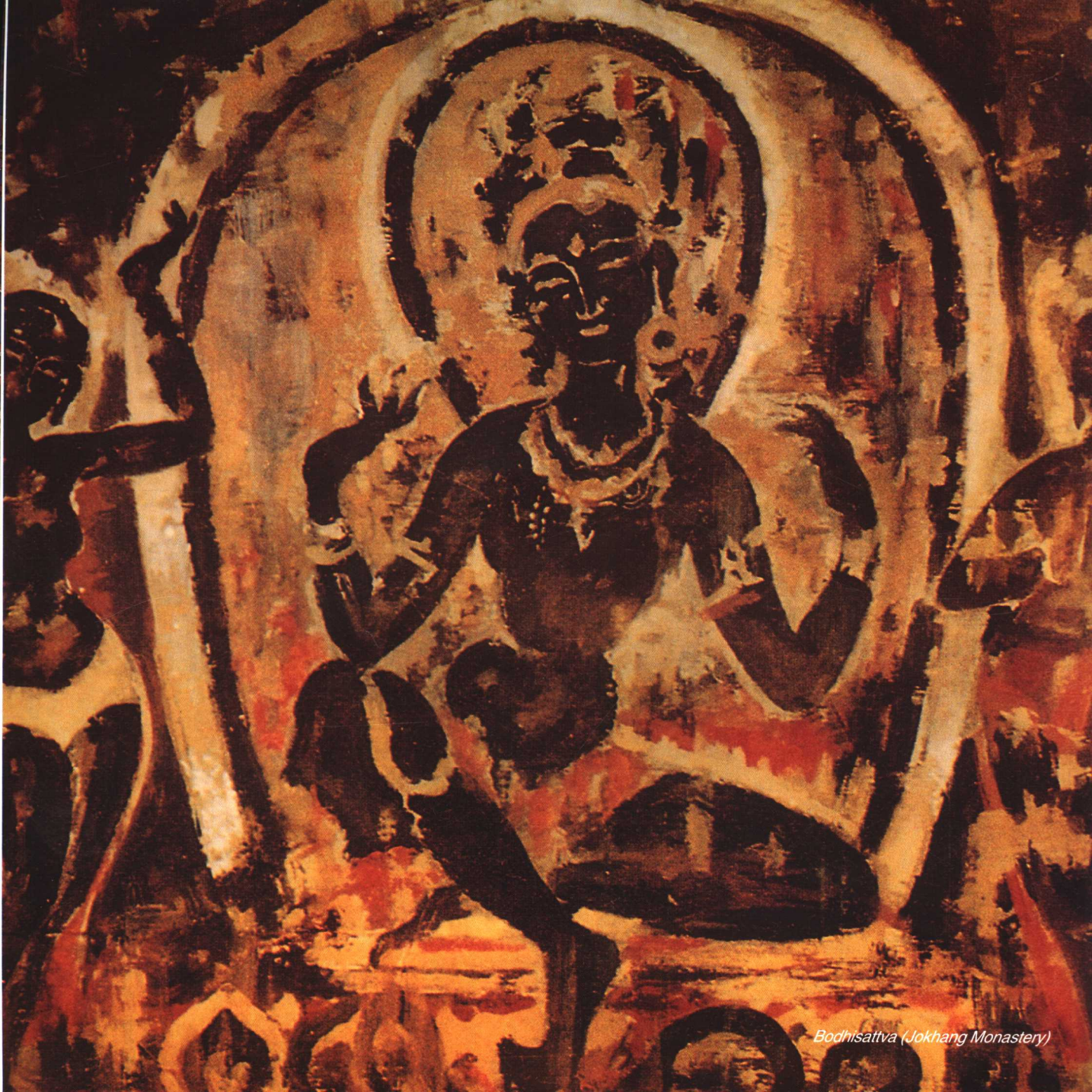


Monastery, the base of the Sagyapa Buddhism in Shannan, were painted by him or his disciples. Kartri School was founded by Namkar Drashi from Yardul of Shannan. On the basis of proficient use of the skills of the Mentang School, he also drew landscape painting skills from the Chinese hinterland and emphasized the delicate brush stroke and trimming style, and liked to use black and green colors. This school were widely spread in Eastern Tibet and carried forward by the famous painters Choskyi Drashi and Geshe Karma Drashi, who left many masterpieces in the Riwoqe Monastery

and Qambaling Monastery in Qamdo.

The three major schools, especially the Mentang and Chenzher, reached a brilliant peak in fresco painting in the 17th century A.D. During the periods of rebuilding the White Palace of the Potala supervised by the 5th Dalai Lama and the Red Palace thereof overseen by Desi (the regent) Sangye Gyatso, the painters of the different schools left a huge number of masterpieces of frescoes in the magnificent architecture complex, which is now on the List of the World Cultural Heritages. More were added in the following generations. The frescoes can be





*Bodhisattva (Jokhang Monastery)*





*Naga girls( Guge )*

seen everywhere, i.e. in the Memorial Hall for the fifth Dalai Lama and the corridors on the 2nd and 3rd floors of the Red Palace, as if being in a museum of the Tibetan frescoes. Among the master painters, there were Qoiying Gyaco from Xigaze, Lozhag Dainzin Norbu from Mentang of Lozhag, and Dalhong Palgong from Yamzhou Yumco Lake side, etc. Qoiying Gyaco, the founder of the New Mentang School, was assigned by the 4th Panchan Lama Lobsang Chokyi (1570 - 1662) to paint in the White Palace.

After the reconstruction of the White Palace and Red Palace, The 5th Dalai Lama and the Desi (the Regent) Sangye Gyatso felt the need to set up a special team of painters. Therefore 25 painters from different regions were picked up to stay in Lhasa and responsible for painting for the major monasteries and palaces. The team was named Lharibajidu, implicating sharing both hardship and happiness. Another name of the team was Suqiongwa, meaning a

small turret, because its headquarter was in a turret inside the Jokhang Monastery. The painters were divided into four classes in terms of their positions and skills: i.e. the senior master called Wuqen, the junior master called Wuqiong, the painter and the apprentice.

Many famous painters of the recent epoch and the present age in Tibet are successors of the above-mentioned 25 painters. They keep track of the skills of the Mentang and Chenzher Schools and some even come to a high degree of professional proficiency. The frescoes in the New Palace of The Norbulingka were painted under the leadership of the great masters such as Legtsan Sonam Rinchen and Chongdo Paljor Japo in 1950s. Among the modern time painters, Amdo Qamba is an outstanding example, who has evolved into his own artistic style by drawing some elements from paintings of Europe and Chinese hinterland and heading beyond the tradition, The masterpieces in the New Palace of the Norbulingka, such as The Conqueror of Tripe World, and The Six Ornaments and Three Supreme Buddhist Philosophers, etc, were painted by him.

Since 1980s, the Chinese government has energetically fulfilled the religious and cultural policies and allotted a large sum of money to preserve and maintain the cultural relics, historic sites and major monasteries. In Lhasa a company for maintaining the ancient architectures was

established, which invited several eminent painters from Suqiongwa, such as Wuqen Drashi Tsering, Wuqiong Dobuji Chilai Chunpel, Gersang Namgyai and Renzin Benjor, etc, to paint frescoes and teach the skills. Besides, some other masters such as Shelho from Xigaze, Trewan Dorji from Shannan and Lobsang Sherab from Qamdo, also painted many well-known frescoes. The fresco art, as an important constituent of the Tibetan ethnic traditional cultures, will certainly be handed down on the snowy plateau from generation to generation.



*Tara ( Jokhang Monastery )*

*Note: Tara is a goddess of Tibetan Buddhism and said to be the manifestation of the Goddess of Mercy. There are altogether 21 images of Tara with different colors.*





Cho Dance ( Samye  
Monastery, Partial)





*Hevajra (Tsaahilhungpo Monastery)*



*Flying Deity with a Trumpet  
(Dungkar Grotto)*



*A Buddhist Story (Guge)*



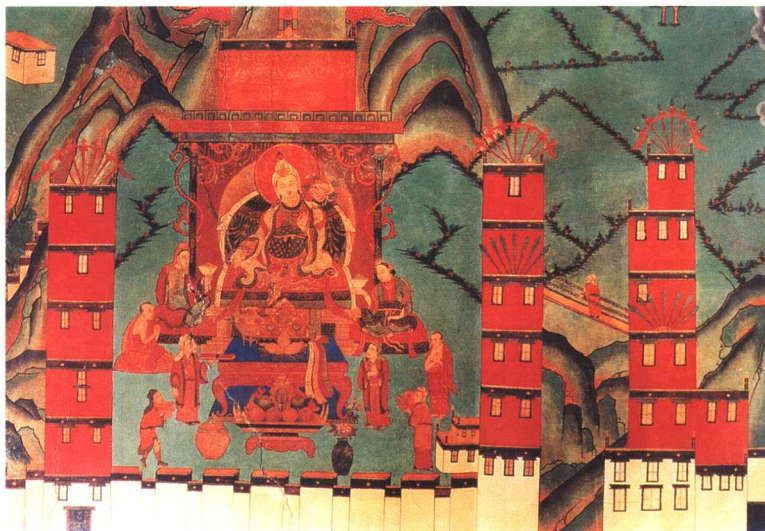


*Welcome Ceremony in the Samye monastery*





*Celebration in Guge*



*A Fresco ( Potala Palace )*

*Note: When Songtsan, Gampo moved to Lhasa, he ordered to build a large palace complex on the Red Hill and thus named it Red Palace, which was the precursor of the Potala.*





*Pilgrimage (Guge)*





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Performing Tibetan Opera  
(Potshi Palace)





*Boating on River (Potala Palace)*

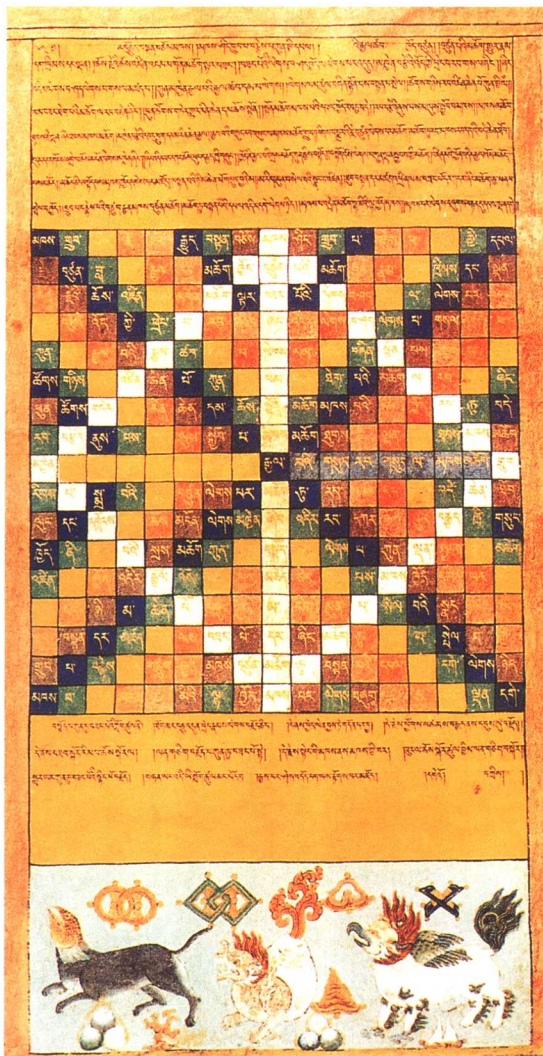


*Swimming (Potala Palace)*





*Dakinis (Aqi Monastery in Nagri)*



*Diagram of the Cyclic Verse  
(Tсахилхунпо Monastery)*





*Movement for Elimination of the Buddhism launched by the Last Tubo King Lang Darma (The New Palace of the Norbulingka)*



*Assassination of Lang Darma (The New Palace of the Norbulingka)*

*Note: the Action for Elimination of the Buddhism launched by Lang Darma aroused the hatred among the Buddhist monks and followers. He was eventually killed by the monk Lhalong Bedo.*