**Tibetan Modernism**

The emergence of Tibetan modernism strongly reflects the social and political changes that the ‘roof of the world’ underwent throughout the twentieth century. Central to this were attempts by artists to negotiate between Tibet’s Buddhist tradition and modern thought. Gendun Choephel is largely recognised today as the pioneering figure in Tibetan modern art. Since then, following the Communist take-over of Tibet and the establishment of an exile-government in Dharamsala, artistic movements have developed both from within Tibet and in India. Increasingly, a diasporic and global community of Tibetan artists based largely in the West have also gained prominence. Many modern artists saw themselves as creative innovators, moving away from Tibet’s scroll and mural painting discourse, yet at the same time also drawing on this unique stock of religious iconographies to forge unique expressions of Tibetan modernity. In more recent times, artists from the Sweet Tea Artists’ Association generation have also adopted more contemporary artistic vernacular in their art practice. These artists have also gained international following – among them Gongkar Gyatso and Tsering Nyandak. Though many of these artists are based overseas and belong to the exile community, the longing for homeland, the desire to express sensitive political issues through their art practices and the search for a Tibetan identity through their art remain central to their artistic explorations.

The beginning of Tibetan modern art is attributed to polyglot scholar monk Gendun Choephel (1903 – 51). Though his works that have survived remain sparse, a series of free form pen sketches, illustrated prints published in the Tibetan newspaper - *Mirror of News from All Sides of the World -* along with a collection of watercolour drawings he prepared during his travel across India to Sri Lanka, indicate the eclecticism of his experimentation. These watercolour sketches were meant to accompany his journal, for his travel journal, *The Golden Surface, the story of a Cosmopolitan’s Pilgrimaged*, demonstrated a move away from techniques and conventions of traditional *thangka* paintings, in which he was initially trained.

His southern sojourn in the 1930s would expose him to new range of visual experiences from Buddhist murals of Ajanta to Japanese calligraphic techniques by way of Viswa Barati University at Santiniketan. In this period, he was perhaps also influenced by the paintings of the Himalaya by Russian mystic Nicholas Roerich as well as Orthodox icons. No works of his in the latter style have emerged so far. Instead their influence can be seen in the works of his disciple, Jampa Tseten, who became the ‘state’ *thangka* painter of Tibetan government. Jampa Tseten is known to have combined Western realism with the strict iconometric composition of Tibetan religious painting. The result of this is a combination of photographic facial features set against the flat, brightly coloured and graphic forms, common to representations of figures and objects in *thangka* and temple murals.

For Tibetans who followed the Dalai Lama to escape Chinese rule in 1959, Dharamsala became the seat of the government-in-exile where traditional art and cultural heritage were largely privileged over innovation. Examples of these include the promotion of sand mandala paintings in overseas cultural museums. Often this was framed within the rhetoric that traditional Tibetan art was endangered as the result of the communist takeover. Ironically, it was in Lhasa, now under Chinese rule that modern art developed after a period of devastation during the Cultural Revolution and following the opening of China to reforms in 1979. This began with the ‘Kanze School’, a school of Sino-Tibetan Socialist Realism resulting from the collaboration of Han Chinese artist Mis Ting Kha’e and Rigzin Namgyal in the early 1980s. An example of this work is *The Meeting of the General and the Monk in Kanze in 1936 (1980)*, a history painting that depicts a Communist official sitting cross legged in conversation with a Tibetan monk, framed by decorative motifs found in traditional thangka paintings, commemorating the assistance rendered by the Tibetan monk Getag Tulku to the general during the Long March.

The reforms and opening up of China in 1979 had an impact on the introduction of a new wave of avant-garde into the Tibet Autonomous region as well. Sweet Tea Artists’ Association founded in the mid-1980s modelled itself after the Parisian *Salon des Refuses*. It sought to resist the expression of Tibetan identity through the essentialist representation of Tibetan folk and pastoral ideals commonly found in socialist realist paintings. They rejected the discourse of Tibet as a Chinese ‘minority’ tribe by engaging with modernist aesthetic such as abstraction and expressionism, often fusing it with traditional Tibetan iconography. At the same time, this was also a generation of artists who did not receive training in traditional *thangka* painting. As such, they represented a generation of Tibetan artists who attempt to model their practice according to an avant-garde modernism, yet at the same time also recover specific context and modes of representation in the religious traditions of Tibet in order to advance a new model of artistic practice and identity.

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