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| Tibetan Modernism |
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| 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 process 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. Following the Communist takeover of Tibet and the establishment of an exile government in Dharamsala, artistic movements developed both within Tibet and in India. Increasingly, a diasporic and global community of Tibetan artists based largely in the West has 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 expressions of Tibetan modernity. In more recent times, artists from the Sweet Tea Artists’ Association generation have also adopted more contemporary artistic vernaculars in their art practice. These artists, among them Gongkar Gyatso and Tsering Nyandak, have also gained international followings. 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 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 process 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. Following the Communist takeover of Tibet and the establishment of an exile government in Dharamsala, artistic movements developed both within Tibet and in India. Increasingly, a diasporic and global community of Tibetan artists based largely in the West has 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 expressions of Tibetan modernity. In more recent times, artists from the Sweet Tea Artists’ Association generation have also adopted more contemporary artistic vernaculars in their art practice. These artists, among them Gongkar Gyatso and Tsering Nyandak, have also gained international followings. 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 Influence of Gendun Choephel The beginning of Tibetan modern art is attributed to polyglot scholar monk Gendun Choephel (1903-51). Though his surviving works remain sparse, their variety indicates the eclecticism of his experimentation: 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. These watercolour sketches were meant to accompany his journal, for his travel journal, *The Golden Surface, the story of a Cosmopolitan’s Pilgrimage*, demonstrated a move away from the 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 the Buddhist murals of the Ajanta Caves to Japanese calligraphic techniques at Viswa Barati University in Santiniketan. In this period, he was perhaps also influenced by paintings of the Himalaya by Russian mystic Nicholas Roerich, as well as by 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 the Tibetan government. Jampa Tseten is known to have combined Western realism with the strict iconometric composition of Tibetan religious painting. The result was a combination of photographic facial features set against flat, brightly coloured graphic forms, common to representations of figures and objects in *thangka* and temple murals. Exile, Tradition, and Reform 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. An example would be the promotion of sand mandala paintings in overseas cultural museums. Often this was framed within the rhetoric that traditional Tibetan art was endangered as a result of the communist takeover. Ironically, it was in Lhasa, now under Chinese rule, that modern art developed following the devastation of the Cultural Revolution and then the opening of China to reforms in 1979. Development 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 encouraged the introduction of a new wave of avant-garde art into the Tibet Autonomous Region as well. The 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 aesthetics such as abstraction and expressionism, often fusing these 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 to recover specific contexts 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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