

Compte-rendu

Karl Debreczeny, *The Black Hat Eccentric: Artistic Visions of the Tenth Karmapa*, with contributions by Ian A. Alsop, David P. Jackson, and Irmgard Mengele. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2012. 320 pp. Numerous plates.

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The art of Tibet, like much of Indian, Byzantine, and Western Medieval art, is the work of anonymous masters. Exceptions do occur, and in some cases groups of artworks seem certainly to have been produced by one and the same anonymous hand, so that the “master of thus-and-such” begins to assume a shadowy form, almost as if his identity were known. The search for these nameless masters, or, conversely, for work to attribute to some whose names we know, but whose art we so far lack, has been a prominent trajectory in recent art history. A particularly spectacular achievement along these lines was the Metropolitan Museum of New York’s 2011 exhibition “Master Painters of India.”¹

The trend we see here has not been without ramifications for the study of Tibetan art. The contributions of David P. Jackson have been crucial here. His efforts to establish, with unprecedented rigor, the links between textual references to artwork and actual surviving works has meant that, although the artists themselves have often remained obscure, their creations in a growing number of cases may be assigned to relatively precise places and times, and to specific groups of religious teachers and patrons.² In reference to the noted 18th century Karma Bka’-brgyud master, Si-tu Pañ-chen Chos-kyi-byung-gnas (1699-1774), in particular, his role as designer and pa-

¹ For the catalogue, see John Guy and Jorrit Britschgi, *Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India, 1100-1900* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011). The exceptional research underlying this exhibition, however, is best exemplified in the collaborative publication of the curators: Milo Beach, B. N. Goswamy, Eberhard Fischer, *Masters of Indian Painting, 1100-1900*, 2 vols. (Zurich: Artibus Asiae, 2011).

² Jackson’s *A History of Tibetan Painting* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1996) provided the first sustained effort (earlier suggestions were found chiefly in several of the prefaces authored by E. Gene Smith) to explore the relevance of literary references for the history of Tibetan art.

tron has begun to be carefully clarified, and his own efforts as a painter as well.³

The prospect of identifying certain of the paintings of the tenth Karma-pa hierarch, Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje (1604-74), whose achievements as an artist have been long celebrated in Tibetan literature, with particular surviving *thang-kas* was first rigorously examined by Jackson as well.⁴ A slowly swelling body of Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje attributions has followed. It was, however, Karl Debreczeny who undertook to explore fully the pathways to which Jackson's initial synthesis seemed to point, visiting out-of-the-way temples and local collections in Yunnan and Sichuan, studying thoroughly the relevant Tibetan and Chinese literature, and finally establishing a substantial corpus of work that can be convincingly assigned to Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje, to the workshops he directed, or to his followers and imitators. The results of that research form the basis for *The Black Hat Eccentric*, the splendid catalogue for a 2012 exposition at the Rubin Museum of Art (RMA) in New York that, alas, failed to materialize after promised loans from the Chinese collections could not be secured, though there remains some hope that a future effort to mount the exhibition will yet prove successful.

Seven of the ten chapters of *The Black Hat Eccentric* are Debreczeny's work. They form the core of the volume and represent the major achievements of the project as a whole. These begin (chapter 2) with an examination of Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje's early artistic career during the troubled period of civil war that engulfed Central Tibet, at which time the Karmapa was elevated to ecclesiastic supremacy by the rulers of Gtsang, and his subsequent exile to Lijiang in northern Yunnan after forces allied with the Fifth Dalai Lama crushed the Gtsang-pa kingdom. This was a disaster for both the Karma-pa and the order he led, but for the history of Tibetan art was mitigated by the opportunity it presented to the Karma-pa to absorb Chinese painting technique and imagery, well represented in the collections of the Lijiang royal household. One of the marvels of the Karma-pa's prodigious artistic talent was his seemingly endless ability to weather adversity through creativity, and to reinvent his visual idiom as he matured. The favor he received, as religious teacher and artist, from

³ David P. Jackson, *Patron and Painter: Situ Panchen and the Revival of the Encampment Style* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2009).

⁴ Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting*, chapter 9, "Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje, the 10th Zhwa-nag Karma-pa." As Jackson is careful to document throughout, a number of paintings and sculptures had already been attributed to Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje. His work, and Debreczeny's, will clarify for interested readers subsequent assessments of these earlier attributions.

the Lijiang court, meant that his years of exile were particularly productive ones.

Chapters 3-5 offer detailed studies of several sets of paintings in whose creation Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje was intimately involved. A magnificent set of the arhats, preserved in the Lijiang Municipal Museum, is attributed by Debreczeny to the Karma-pa's own hand. These make subtle use of Chinese brush techniques and incorporate motifs derived from earlier Chinese paintings which, in many cases, Debreczeny has been able to identify precisely. But these paintings are also filled with whimsical details, demonstrating that their creator was by no means a mere imitator, but instead sought to use whatever he had appropriated from past work in order to advance his own, distinctive vision. This vision was furthered by those who worked under his direction in the workshops he established, as seen in surviving sets of the arhats (chapter 4) and of the deeds of the Buddha (chapter 5). The latter are noteworthy for their unusually crowded composition, with numerous people and animals jostling all about the central actors. Given the brightly colored backgrounds and costumes of these scenes—a far cry from the subdued, sinicized palate of the arhat paintings—one may even wonder whether the distant influence of contemporaneous Mughal art might not be a factor at work here, a possibility (?) that is not raised at all in the present text.

In chapter 6, Debreczeny turns to reconsider the paintings assigned to Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje in earlier scholarship, and in chapter 7 to questions of "Genre, Style, and Medium." If in the first he is notably cautious in his assessments, in the second he is unequivocal in presenting the conclusions of trenchant comparisons with the Karma-pa's Chinese and other sources of inspiration. Debreczeny's noteworthy control of the pertinent Chinese and Tibetan visual and textual sources strikes this reader as particularly compelling throughout this chapter, and should stand as model for future scholarship treating of "Sino-Tibetan" visual culture overall.

Debreczeny's final contribution to the volume, chapter 9, takes up "The Tenth Karma-pa's Place in Tibetan Tradition," surveying both Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje's reputation as an artist, as documented in Tibetan literary sources down to the present day, and the diverse ways in which his oeuvre plausibly impacted upon the work of later artists, within and beyond the Karma Bka'-brgyud school. Taken together, Debreczeny's accomplishment throughout this volume is outstanding, leading one to long only for the opportunity to actually see the work reproduced here, something that one hopes will become possible if and when the appropriate authorities succeed in clearing the way for the success of the originally planned RMA show.

The Black Hat Eccentric includes three additional chapters. The first (chapter 1, "The Artist's Life"), by Irmgard Mengele, is an abridgement of the Karma-pa's biography, and is based on the author's extensive dissertation researches detailing the biographical traditions.⁵ Though much useful information is indeed contained here, the chapter is disappointing in virtue of its frequent lapses of style and editorial care, its flat retelling of the story as an uninterpreted narrative. An important section of the account, for instance, concerns a harrowing journey from Lijiang north to Mi-nyag and Mgo-log (pp. 51-56), but though the pains and hardships of the voyage are recounted at length, we are never clear about why the Karma-pa undertook all this trouble in the first place. The tale, as it is told here, seems barely coherent. Far more satisfactory is the recent life of Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje authored by the present Zhwa-dmar Rin-po-che, which clearly relates these events to the exigencies of the seventh Zhwa-dmar-pa Ye-shes-snying-po's recognition.⁶

One minor detail in Dr. Mengele's chapter also merits a brief comment: On p. 47 one notes that, while traveling in the region of Lho-brag, Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje is offered an animal called a *ba-men*. As Dr. Mengele's n. 145 shows, it was not possible for her to identify this species securely. The late Michael Aris, however, offered this comment on the *ba-men*, which, given the territories mentioned, is entirely pertinent here:

The mithan (or mithun, mytton etc., *Bos frontalis*, in Tibetan *ba-men*, lit. "noncow") is the hybrid of the wild Indian ox known as the gaur (*Bas gaurus*) and the domestic cow. It has great prestige value in the eastern Himalayas, extending from eastern Bhutan through the whole of Arunachal Pradesh.⁷

Although I have some doubts regarding Aris's proposed etymology—it is not at all clear to me that *men* should be interpreted as equivalent to *min*—I believe that the zoological and social information he supplies is quite certain. It may be worthwhile to take a

⁵ A version of Mengele's thesis has recently been published by Vajra Publications, Kathmandu, under the title *Riding a Huge Wave of Karma: The Turbulent Life of the Tenth Karma-pa*. I have not yet seen this work.

⁶ Shamar Rinpoche, *A Golden Swan in Turbulent Waters: The Life and Times of the Tenth Karmapa Choying Dorje* (Lexington VA: Bird of Paradise Press, 2012), pp. 193-195.

⁷ Michael Aris, 'Jigs-med-gling-pa's "Discourse on India" of 1789: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of the lHo-phyogs rgya-gar-gyi gtam brtag-pa brgyad-kyi me-long (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1995), p. 67, n. 23.

new look at some of the bovines depicted in Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje's work with this in mind.

Although my comments on *The Black Hat Eccentric* have focused upon the Karma-pa's achievements as a painter, the volume also treats his career as a sculptor, an aspect of his work that has so far been most thoroughly studied by the Swiss collector and art historian Ulrich von Schroeder. Debreczeny, indeed, touches upon the sculptures at various points throughout, but the subject is given more focused treatment only in chapter 8, "The Sculpture of Chöying Dorje, Tenth Karmapa," by Ian Alsop, who seeks to identify a number of puzzling images, both carved and moulded, as the likely creations of the Karmapa, as well as some that were inspired by or imitative of his style. He rejects the position advanced by von Schroeder that several of these sculptures, although bearing inscriptions attributing their fabrication to Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje, are in fact very early Tibetan statues, dating to the period of the "Yar-lung dynasty" of the 7th-9th centuries, and that the engraved inscriptions are later additions. Similarly, he rejects von Schroeder's contentions that a number of closely similar statues also belong to the early period, and that the real works by Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje are imitative of these ancient statues. Alsop, by contrast, holds that the inscriptions must be taken at face value and establish the Karma-pa to have been their creator, that the closely similar statues must also be his, and that the apparent imitations are due to Chos-dbyings-rdo-rje's later followers and mimics. That the issues involved here are somewhat contentious may be seen in the sharply worded review of Alsop's chapter that von Schroeder has published on Alsop's asianart.com website: <http://www.asianart.com/articles/10karmapa-uvs-review/index.html>.

It is of course striking, and most revealing with respect to the degree of advancement of the field of Tibetan art history, that two well-regarded experts might differ by almost a millennium in their assessment of the dating of certain objects. Indeed, so few sculptures of undoubted Yar-lung dynasty provenance are known to us that any assignment of statuary to this period must be somewhat treacherous. Despite the fact that I have no expertise in this particular area and have not in any case examined the original objects, but have seen only photographs, it seems to me that neither Alsop nor von Schroeder succeeds in making a fully convincing case. Alsop notes, for instance, the odd feature of several of the images, in which the main figure is mounted upon a cow, that the animal is depicted chewing on a mouthful of fodder. This is a most unusual iconographic element, so far as I am aware, and yet, as Debreczeny's careful analysis of the Karma-pa's paintings clearly shows, the depiction of animals eating is virtually a leitmotif throughout his oeuvre. Von

Schroeder's case, by contrast, seems particularly strong in view of the evident wear of some of these works, concerning which Alsop's proposed explanations seem somewhat hasty (e.g., p. 229: "I would imagine that there were many times when more than one sacred metal image was tumbled into a saddlebag without the benefit of bubblewrap..."). Particularly fraught, too, is the problem of Tibetan fakery. Though the manufacture of reproductions of old Tibetan images by ateliers in Qing China is well documented, we have little positive knowledge regarding such a practice in Tibet, though Tibetan metal-casters undoubtedly had the requisite skills. Ultimately, possibly only forensic testing will resolve the matter in this case, and its eventual resolution, one way or the other, will likely advance our knowledge of the history of Tibetan sculpture in as yet unforeseen ways.

The tenth and final chapter, "The challenge of translating art historical terms from the biography of the Tenth Karmapa," by David P. Jackson, will be of interest primarily to specialists on Tibetan textual traditions dealing with art and recalls some of the outstanding difficulties we face in determining the correspondences between text and image.

Given the overall importance and excellence of *The Black Hat Eccentric*, it may seem petty to point out small blemishes. The few that I have noted are mentioned here solely for the interest of specialists.

Two typographical errors are repeated throughout the book:

- For Potala(ka) one sees the erroneous Poṭala(ka). The name of Avalokiteśvara's paradise-like mountain is derived from Sanskrit *pota* in the meaning of "ship," and not from *poṭa* meaning "bundle." Curiously, this same error is found in the entry *gru 'dzin* in the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*.
- The Tibetan letter called 'a chung, ' in Wylie transcription, has been incorrectly treated as if it were a single quotation mark and allowed to default to ' at the beginnings of words. It should be consistently represented as ' throughout.

Some bibliographical points may be signalled as well:

- On p. 83, fig. 2.16, we find an illustration of some pages from the 'Jang Sa-tham edition of the Kangyur, with reference to a work entitled *Kangba lun zang*, that is nowhere referenced, so far as I can tell. It would seem that the work in question is: 杰当·西饶江措著; 云南省民族学会藏族研究委员会编 (Jie dang · xi rao jiang cuo ; yun nan sheng min zu xue hui. zang zu yan jiu wei

yuan hui), 康巴论藏 (*Kang ba lun zang*). 云南民族出版社 Kunming : Yun nan min zu chu ban she, 2008.

- In the bibliography itself, p. 313, we find the surprising entry: “dGe ’dun chos ’phel (1923) 1998. *Gnas yig phyogs bsgrigs*. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe. Reprinted.” To the best of my knowledge, Dge-’dun-chos-’phel published no such work in 1923, when he was perhaps 18 years old, nor did he at any time during his later life. The volume in question is an anthology of pilgrimage guides by various hands, and includes Dge-’dun-chos-’phel’s well-known guide to the holy places of India, but he was by no means the author or editor of the work as a whole. Where the date 1923 may have come from is a mystery to me.

Finally, I note one recent publication that may be of interest to readers of *The Black Hat Eccentric*: 康-格桑益希 (Khams Skal-bzang-ye-shes), 藏传噶玛嘎孜画派唐卡艺术 (*Karma sgar bris lugs kyi thang ka sgyu rtsal*). 2 vols. (in Chinese). Chengdu: Sichuan meishu chubanshe, 2013. This very extensive work treats many of the same paintings as do *The Black Hat Eccentric* and Jackson’s *Patron and Painter*. A critical assessment of it must, however, await another occasion.

