

Franz Xaver Erhard and Thomas Wild, Drumze - Metamorphoses of the Tibetan Carpet, Edition Tethys, Potsdam, 2022, 110 pages.

by Amy Heller

This volume is a book created in the context of an exhibition in Germany of Tibetan rugs, from several private German collections held in the Teppichmuseum Schloss Voigtsberg, Vogtland, Germany from October 2021 to December 2022. It is indeed an exhibition catalog yet it is much more. The catalog of the exhibition comprises 35 color plates illustrating Tibetan rugs spanning from the 15th to the 20th century. In addition, there are six contemporary carpets produced in factories by refugee Tibetans as well as modern German designers working in both Kathmandu and India. The carpets range from a vast diversity of purely traditional Tibetan motifs to religious symbols complemented by purely abstract non-figurative designs. Visually striking, the reader is confronted with an elegant black matte page in which is centered a rectangular or square carpet in vibrant colors. The selection is a judicious progression in terms of historical and geographic provenance.

The analytical essays preceding the selection of carpets seek to convey history, geography and typology of Tibetan carpets and weaving techniques to the general reader. The essays are impressive and comprehensive in their focus. The first chapter is entitled Carpet stories and histories, with three sections to cover the origin of Tibetan carpets, Tibetan carpets in Western Travel Accounts, Carpets in Tibetan sources. In the section Monastic carpets and carpet tradition, the reader is introduced to the rugs known as Wangden Drumze, i.e. the carpets of the Wangden Valley, a branch of the Nyang valley, one of the most important places of traditional carpet production. They then discuss the Wangden medallion and its Central Asian roots (which the authors link to the Azha kingdom of the 7th century and migration of some of the population to the vicinity of Zhalu Monastery, p. 28). In the section entitled “creation of a sacred carpet tradition” a number of individual design motifs (*svāstika*, frog foot, double dorje, pearl *inter alia*) are presented. The next section is devoted to traditional secular carpets, notably the Khamdrum carpets. The geographical factors are crucial here – for Khamdrum does not refer to rugs from Khams, but rather to rugs produced in the vicinity of Khampa rdzong. The following chapter discusses designer carpets in early 20th century, notably the paramountcy of Gyantse as great weaving center and the pivotal

location of Gyantse for goods in transit from central Tibet to India and vice versa. There was burgeoning growth of industrial production of dyes, mainly in Germany, post 1850, with trading outlets of German and associate firms in Calcutta and Bombay, eventually imported to Tibet. The results were striking: "In no other Central Asian tradition, did the introduction of chemical dyes lead to such a new and free artistic development as in Tibet" (p. 45), with special production for use in Lhasa by commissions for the Dalai Lama and the government offices of the Khashag. In particular, the family of Ka shod Chos rgyal Nyi ma (1902–1985) came to be socially and political prominent; he was a *rtsis dpon* (finance minister), and a "passionate" carpet lover, commissioning many carpets of new designs, engaging weavers on the family estate near Gyantse and eventually even a carpet factory in Lhasa (p. 46). The concluding section is entitled "Tibetan carpets beyond borders", starting with Lhasa and China rugs. Here the discussion focus is the developments in central Tibet, primarily Lhasa as of the mid-20th century establishment of the Lhasa Carpet factory, notably with the invitation of Chinese weavers to Tibet post 1953; after restricted production during the Cultural revolution, subsequently co-operative carpet factories were organized, some in cooperation with private initiatives and NGO's through the early 21st century. In India the role of Moravian missionaries during the second half of the 20th century is highlighted, as well as their esthetic preferences and technical innovations in size of carpets. Simultaneously, Nepal witnessed the development of a very successful carpet production by Tibetans, with production cooperatives partially financed by the Swiss Red Cross and SATA (Swiss Association for Technical Assistance), such as the CTC (Carpet Trading Company) in Kathmandu. The study concludes with discussion of notable individual or family carpet dealers / producers of contemporary Tibetan carpets and their impact in the international market.

The catalogue section is divided in four parts: Wangdrum (temple rugs for long aisles as well as individual square sitting rugs), Khamdrum (classic medallions and border), Free designs (floral, tigers, dragons, phoenix, checkerboard), Beyond borders, with carpets produced in India and Nepal, both traditional models and selections for the contemporary international market.

The authors make frequent reference to the pioneering study by Philip Denwood (1974), which was followed by the exhibition catalogue by Diana Myers in 1984 at Textile Museum (Washington DC), and the same year, the bi-lingual Tibetan-Chinese study by Bsod rnam rgyal mtshan (1984), all of which were seminal publications at a time when few carpets were known outside Tibet and the Tibetan refugee communities. There is also acknowledgement of later publications

such as the book by weaver H. Kuloy (1988), as well as special thematic books of distinguished collectors. All these contributed to the current popularity and awareness of the distinctive qualities of Tibetan carpets. Earlier, one may recall the research by Karl Gösta Montell, who traveled with Sven Hedin in Central Asia, 1929-1933, for his 1934 publication on Asian textile techniques, notably illustrating a back-strap (horizontal) loom showing a Tebbu Tibetan weaver seated in a heavy wooden sledge-like frame, Tibet, p. 41: *Studierasiatisk textilteknik, Ymer* 54, pp. 40-58.

The section on the origin of Tibetan carpets starts with the discussion that much of Tibetan culture originates in the great neighbouring civilizations of India and China, recounting the tradition of the attribution of weaving and knotting to the Chinese bride of Srong btsan sgam po. Immediately after this statement, the authors refer to the authoritative studies by both Denwood and Bsod rnam rgyal mtshan both of whom convincingly refute this attribution as inaccurate. Denwood notably traced the ancestry of the Tibetan vertical loom and distinctive Tibetan knotting prior to the 7th century. The archaeological study by Zhang He (2021),¹ illustrating carpets from Khotan Shanpula on the Southern Silk Road dating from 4th to 6th century confirm this early chronology, According to the analysis of Erhard and Wild (p. 9), the Shanpula carpets exhibit the “same weaving technique as the Wangdrum carpets still made in the Wangden Valley today, and are backed with felt, as can be found in Tibetan carpets to this day.” All in all, the influences and impact of western Central Asia are clearly indicated.

The section on carpet culture in Central Tibet provides a detailed explanation of the geographic and historic span of loom typology and differentiations. The most common loom in the Himalayas and Tibet is the horizontal treadle loom in which the weaver is seated on the ground, in front of his/her loom to produce fine fabrics (such as flannel) as well adapting the loom to produce pile rugs by the addition of weft threads into the back warp. Tibetan carpets, on the contrary, were woven on vertical looms, the Tibetan loom being a variant of the West Asian two beam loom. The specific Tibetan technique preserves a system which had been documented in ancient Egypt, then spread through the Middle East to the Sassanian Empire in Persia, which extended to the Tarim basin. The hypothesis is that the Tibetans acquired this type of loom via multi-cultural exchange along the Silk Routes during the expansion of the Tibetan Empire in Central Asia.

¹ The footnote 9 cites He 2021 as author, however the author is listed in the bibliography as Zhang He.

As the terminology of the design motifs and the typology of carpets are perhaps unfamiliar to many readers who are not Tibetan rug specialists or aficionados, the authors have provided an English-Tibetan glossary of carpet related terms which is an innovation and very useful guide to the vocabulary of rugs as well as dyestuffs. The title of the volume is *Drumze* defined by the authors as “Tibetan carpet” (see p.15). The *Tshig mdzod chen po* clarifies that *grum tse* is a sort of carpet with thick pile, literally “donkey mane” (vol. 1: 406: *gdan gyi bye brag dre’u rngog*) while in Jäschke dictionary (1972 reprint, p. 78) , *grum tse* is defined as a “thick woolen blanket”. Goldstein and Ngarkyid translate “ carpet” as *rum*, synonym *grum rtse*, and *kha gdan* (1984, p. 62). The volume concludes with an extensive bibliography.

Complemented by numerous historical archive photographs of buildings and weavers, as well as maps, loom designs, knot designs and rug photographs from distinguished public and private collections, the volume is well balanced between text and illustrative material. The clear technical explanations accompanied by the diagrams are particularly appreciated.

