

INDIA 18/2/2004 21:52

TIBETAN PAINTING IS REVIVED IN EXILE

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Culture, Standard

What would drive a person to abandon home and hearth, perhaps forever, and set off on a grueling two-week hike across the coldest and highest mountains in the world? For Younten Dorjee, a 34-year-old Tibetan painter of sacred images, the answer lay in his fervent desire to preserve an ancient Tibetan art form which has only barely survived the devastating invasion and subsequent occupation of his country.

“I walked across the Himalayas (from Tibet to India) for the sole purpose of learning religious painting,” explains Dorjee, who has been living in northern India since fleeing Tibet in 1995. “When the Chinese invaded Tibet they destroyed the monasteries. In my village in eastern Tibet, I saw so many pieces of broken statues all over the ground...so much precious art everywhere destroyed. People talked about opportunities for us Tibetans in India, so I thought I could go there and learn how I could make a difference.”

According to the Tibetan Review, a bimonthly journal published in Dharamsala, India, more than a half-century of Chinese occupation has claimed by violence and by privations an estimated total of 1,278,387 Tibetan lives, slightly less than one-fifth of the population. The religious persecution and genocide initiated by Mao Tse Tung in the 1950s and culminating in the years of the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), has come to characterize China’s illegal policy toward its Tibetan neighbors. The Chinese troops also ravaged the Tibetan landscape: today a mere twenty of the some 6,000 holy sites throughout the country-monasteries, chapels and shrines-remain standing.

The Odyssey of the Refugee Who Became an Artist

Each year an estimated 1,000 Tibetans seek refuge in northern India where, in Dharamsala, Tibet’s spiritual and political leader, Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, has been living in exile since escaping Chinese-controlled Tibet in 1959. Tragically, hundreds of the fleeing men, women and children die along the dangerous road to freedom over the frozen and inaccessible Himalayan peaks.

“It took us sixteen days to get to India,” Younten Dorjee tells us of his journey eight years ago. “First I went to Lhasa where my uncle lives and from there we took a truck to Shigatse (about 300 km southwest of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet). From Shigatse, we began on foot. I was in a group of twenty-two people, the others were mostly monks. We followed our Tibetan guide across very high mountains. We walked for days in snow as high as our knees. In fact, the paths were completely covered by the snow and many times we lost our way. One night it got so cold that we thought we would die. We only had a few blankets so we put two of the blankets down on the snow and we lay on top of one another - all twenty-two of us - to keep warm.” Reliving the scene in his mind Dorjee adds, “We slept in a human pyramid that night.”

For the refugees contact with family and friends back home is rare, and crossing the border back into Tibet without a passport guarantees a minimum penalty of one year in a Chinese prison. “My family still lives in Tibet, but I have never tried to go back to see them,” Younten Dorjee explains. “They have a small farm there where they raise barley and keep a few animals, sheep and yak. But it’s very hard to keep in touch with them, because in our village there is no telephone service.”

Dorjee’s cheerful demeanor belies the loneliness he often feels living in exile. Nevertheless, he seems satisfied with the course his life has taken. “I think it was a good decision that I came to India,” he says. “When I was in Tibet I didn’t know anything about painting. I had no trade or special skills of any kind. Then once I arrived in India, I began working and studying very hard and continued this for many years hoping to become a painter one day.”

Following a rigorous six-year apprenticeship under the guidance of a seasoned master painter, Dorjee has finally realized his dream of becoming a professional artist. He is a painter of *thangkas* - sacred paintings involving natural pigments on canvas which depict Buddhist deities and protectors. *Thangka* painting styles derive from the 7th century Indian sacred art of *pata* and *mandala*, two complex designs used in ancient Buddhist rites.

Dorjee plies his trade in Dharamsala at the Norbulingka Institute, which opened in 1995 with the aim of preserving the artistic and literary traditions of Tibet. Currently 300 Tibetan refugee artisans, writers, teachers, students and administrative staff are employed at the institute, whose chairmanship is held by the Dalai Lama. With workshops ranging from wood-carving to metal statue-crafting to *thangka* painting, Norbulingka emulates the traditional guild system of artists and apprentices that once thrived throughout Tibet.

A Painting that is a Prayer

“The word ‘*thangka*’ in Tibetan means ‘excellent painting,’” Dorjee says emphatically. “The *thangka* is a very special kind of painting.” Vivid colors and finely detailed deities posing in astral backgrounds render the paintings rare treasures for their artistic value alone. However a *thangka* is more than an aesthetic wonder; it is a religious object and medium for expressing Buddhist ideals. The intrinsic worth of the *thangka* lies in its function of providing a model on which Buddhist practitioners can reflect and meditate. Once completed, the *thangkas* are consecrated by a lama, or master cleric, an act which endows the painting with spiritual potency.

Most of the *thangkas* created at the Norbulingka workshop are commissioned either by monasteries-in-exile or by refugee families. “Many Tibetan families have little shrines in their houses and they often hang up a *thangka* as part of the shrine,” Dorjee explains. “In the morning, parents and children sit in front of the *thangka* to pray. To us, the *thangkas* communicate spiritual power and well-being.”

The time required to complete a *thangka* painting hinges on the complexity of the subject matter, which is selected by the master painter according to the recipient’s needs. The master guarantees the accuracy of the proportions, movements and colors of the deities by consulting meticulous instructions set forth in the ancient scriptures. “It all depends on how many figures there are in the composition,” Dorjee says regarding timelines. “Some *thangkas* are completed after only twenty days, but if there are many figures it can take much longer. Once I spent six months on a single

painting which contained over 20 figures.”

A key feature of the artist’s training regime involves cultivating refined powers of concentration. The painters sustain intense mental focus while they sketch or paint eight hours a day, six days a week. “All of us here at Norbulingka sit together in the studio in the morning for a half-hour to pray before we begin our work,” Dorjee says. “This is a normal part of our routine. If you are a painter, you must have absolute concentration and prayer helps you. If you lose your concentration while painting, even for a moment, you risk making serious mistakes or producing second-rate work.” When asked if he ever dreams at night of the deities he paints during the day, Dorjee reflects on the question briefly before scratching his head and smiling, “Yeah, to tell the truth, sometimes I do.”[**POPOLI**]

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