

Artistic practice in Qinghai's Tibetan workshops: the relationship between medieval and modern traditions

Sarah E. Fraser

Artists in Qinghai today deploy much of the same technology in their painting production as medieval workshops in neighbouring Gansu where hundreds of painters sustained eight centuries of high quality production. The relationship between Buddhist guilds in the distant past and active modern Tibetan painters is not such much of unbroken continuity as a question of the circulation of Tibetan artistic practices in temple arts throughout Amdo (or western China). We lack a systematic understanding of Tibetan aesthetic contributions to the region's artistic development, particularly in the case of Dunhuang where Tibetan art made a significant contribution. Cultural exchanges in the 1940's highlight the relevance of a regional history of artistic practice and the necessity of understanding the past through the present.

This is the time to reassess the legacy of Tibetan aesthetic structures in the Gansu-Qinghai region, particularly in light of a 20th century Sichuan painter in Gansu. In 1941, the Han Chengdu painter Zhang Daqian (1899–1983) instinctively recognized the importance of modern Tibetan artists in the millennium of the region's painting history. Realizing that he needed trained professionals from Tibetan Buddhist workshops in an ambitious project to paint thousands of copies of Dunhuang murals, he hired 5 artists at the Kumbum (Taer si). Xiawu cairang, 82, who lives today in Wutun and maintains the Rigong art tradition of Amdo, is one of the painters that went with Zhang to Dunhuang. He is also the only living Rigong artist who possesses the title of "painter, first-class"-equivalent to a national treasure.

I will present findings from my interviews with him conducted over the last 10 years. Through the matrix of these two artists (Zhang and Xiawu) and their cultural exchange, this paper explores the production of Tibetan Buddhist art in the context of continuity and appropriation. I also consider the larger historical implications of their exchange at the moment when western Chinese scholars were enthusiastically exploring Buddhist art as part of a long-overlooked tradition of vernacular art. This moment did not last long. Buddhist art and archaeology quickly became problematic and scholarly compromises were adapted to politically acceptable models. In the late 1940's and early 1950's Tibetan art 'disappeared' in Buddhist archaeological studies of the region but circulated widely in picture books stressing its non-religious associations. In developing a larger framework for understanding Qinghai painting, I consider to what extent contact with the stylistic features of other workshops that spread across Tibet from 11th–17th impacted the workshop practices of Amdo and Xiawu's praxis. The paper will propose a redefinition of artistic transmission and practice in Amdo.