

Contemporary Tibetan art

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The most publishing and studying on Tibetan art focused on the traditional Tibetan art and which is considered as “authentic” artistic of the region. Contemporary Tibetan art is not understood very well by the outside world. However, Tibetan artists have been influenced by the external influence and have created quite a large number of non-traditional arts. Especially, in the early 20th century Tibetan artists embraced Western artistic influence in Tibet. Some Tibetan intellectuals and artists had the opportunity of establishing contact with foreigners and absorbed their visual art technique such as photography and realistic style painting from the outside world. Non-traditional Tibetan paintings and artists started to emerge in Tibet in the 1930s. Among them Gendun Choephel (1903–1951) and Amdo Chamba (1916–2001) who played a pioneering role.

Han Chinese artists have come to Tibet since the 1950s. They used different media, such as woodcut print, wash ink, oil, etc. Their works mainly were in the socialist realist style of the 1960s and 1970s, which came to dominate Tibetan artists at that time.

During the Cultural Revolution, some young Tibetans, such as Cham Sang, Abu, Wandor, Tsering Dorji studied in the art schools in Beijing, and other parts of China. When they came back to Tibet they worked as art designers, illustrators or poster artists – “*ri-mo dmag-mi*” (fine-art soldiers). Amdo Chamba and some Tibetan thangka painters like Tanba Rabten, Yeshe Sherab became poster artists during that time as well.

At that time some secondary schools had fine art courses in Lhasa and the teachers usually taught calligraphy and simple sketching to the students, which were useful for making billboards and posters.

In 1978, The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP was convened. It changed the policies of the CCP from its “Class Struggle” to the “Economic Reform and Open Door Policy”. These changes had far-reaching consequences for all Tibetan ethnic areas and the TAR. Some monasteries and temples were reopened and lost manuscripts were reprinted. Some Western and other foreign art and artists were gradually introduced to China. From the late 1970s, some books about western art and artists were available in the Lhasa bookshops.

Since the middle 1980s, Tibetan artists used different media and experimented with different styles, influenced by modern art. At the same time, some former thangka painters started to teach traditional Tibetan painting to students. Tenpa Rabten, the Monri school thangka painter, came back to Lhasa from a farm in Lhoka, and set up a private school in Lhasa.

In 1981 the Tibet Artists Association (TAA) was established, and in 1997 the Lhasa Artists Association was established (LAA). In 1985 Tibet University was opened, which included an Art Department. The Art Department has three major areas of study: fine arts, music and dance.

In 1980, art and artists in the TAR and other Tibetan ethnic areas have tended to diverse: except traditional Tibetan painters, some other Tibetan artists have done varied experimental art. Some artists base their works on traditional Tibetan thangka techniques, but incorporate elements of realism, surrealism in drawing, chiaroscuro and perspective. The themes are contemporary or non-religious. Some other artists were inspired by the modern western paintings, and they used Tibetan traditional motifs and a free arrangement of composition and colour. These artists are interested in making new synthesised painting.

The Realism style of painting is an important part of contemporary Tibetan painting. Generally there are three different types of realistic art in the TAR and Tibetan ethnic areas. Realism no longer appears to be orthodox style as during the 1960s and 1970s, but rather as another artistic alternative language, which artists employ to express their feelings and thoughts.

As we have noted, socialist realism dominated in the 1960s and 1970s in the TAR, and Tibetan ethnic areas, some artists continue to produce socialist realism paintings and street billboards for specific occasions in the TAR and other ethnic Tibetan areas.

In the TAR and other ethnic Tibetan areas, Tibetan artists and non-Tibetan artists, traditional and non-traditional art, serious and non-serious art continue to coexist. Thus, hybridity and diversity have become key elements of contemporary Tibetan art.