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Introduction to “Buddhist Art of Mongolia: Cross-Cultural Connections, Discoveries, and Interpretations”

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A comparative and analytical discussion of Mongolian Buddhist art is a long overdue project. In the 1970s and 1980s, Nyam-Osoryn Tsultem’s lavishly illustrated publications broke ground for the study of Mongolian Buddhist art.¹ His five-volume work was organized by genre (painting, sculpture, architecture, decorative arts) and included a monograph on a single artist, Zanabazar (Tsultem 1982a, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989). Tsultem’s books introduced readers to the major Buddhist art centers and sites, artists and their works, techniques, media, and styles. He developed and wrote extensively about his concepts of “schools”—including the school of Zanabazar and the school of Ikh Khüree—inspired by Mongolian *ger-* (yurt-) based education, the artists’ teacher-disciple or preceptor-apprentice relationships, and monastic workshops for rituals and production of art. The very concept of “schools” and its underpinning methodology itself derives from the Medieval European practice of workshops and, for example, the model of *scuola* (school) evidenced in Italy. Tsultem borrowed the term and the concept from Russian art-historical literature.

Tsultem was particularly passionate about, and a strong advocate for, Mongol Zurag, the new traditional style of painting he named and invented to protect Mongol identity and nomadic traditional culture against the totalitarian Sovietization campaign carried out in Mongolia throughout the twentieth century (Uranchimeg 2017). Although research on Mongolian Buddhist art is still in its infancy, no archival documentation has been revealed to explain how an organized *scuola* model at Mongolian Buddhist sites actually worked. However, as Tsultem argued, the style, color spectrum and combinations, and high quality overall can be seen as hallmarks of a particular monastic site, the so-called school of Ikh Khüree. There is no doubt that the best artists and artisans of the time were brought to Ikh Khüree and that they and their works contributed to making this site the indisputable center of Mongolian Buddhism,

¹ Tsultem was the first Mongolian to receive a doctorate degree in art history. His dissertation, which he defended at the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1971 in Moscow, provided a historical overview of Mongolian art from prehistoric times through the twentieth century. Later, it was published in Russian as *Iskusstvo Mongolii s drevneishikh vremen do nachala XX veka* (Art of Mongolia from ancient times until the beginning of the twentieth century) (1982b).

particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We also lack much information about it, as well as about artworks from other prominent sites in Mongol territories, including Inner and Outer Mongolia and monasteries founded and run by ethnic Mongol lamas in Eastern Tibet (especially Amdo).

Nonetheless, Tsultem's books were important in establishing the unique contribution of Mongolian Buddhist art to the practice of Mongolian Buddhism and noting its differences from Tibetan Buddhism, with which it shares many common elements. This issue of Mongolia-Tibet commonality and divergences provided the focal point of later scholarly exhibitions and their subsequent publications by French and American art historians, such as Gilles Béguin, Patricia Berger, and Terese Bartholomew, in the 1990s (Béguin 1993; Berger and Bartholomew 1995). These scholars' main aim was to demonstrate the richness and the distinct features of Mongolian Buddhist art and further the knowledge of specific artworks, artists, styles, sites, and iconographies. Not only was their research critically broadened to include primary resources and comparative examples from Tibet and China, it also considered Mongolian art within the larger picture of the Buddhist diaspora and within the Qing multiethnic culture in particular. Besides Béguin's *Trésors de Mongolie* (Treasures of Mongolia, 1993) and Berger and Bartholomew's *Mongolia: The Legacy of Chinggis Khan* (1995), in which numerous Buddhist artworks were described and annotated with several important articles by leading scholars of Mongolia and Buddhist art, not much art-historical scholarship has been published since 1995, with the exception of a substantial two-volume catalogue of masterpieces from several Mongolian museums (Fleming and Shastri 2011) and Isabelle Charleux's many publications, including books on Buddhist architecture in Inner Mongolia and on Mongol pilgrims at Wutaishan (Charleux 2006, 2015, 2016).

This special issue of *Cross-Currents* aims to fill this gap by offering in-depth analyses of particular topics, works of art, and sites, with each contribution authored by an expert in the field and based on extensive research. The topics we have chosen reflect our methodological and analytical parameters. We aim to address the specific qualities of Mongolian Buddhist artworks by placing them in the historical, political, and social context of Inner Asia, and specifically the Tibet-Mongolia interface. Neither isolating Mongolia nor limiting our primary sources to Tibetan and Chinese archives, we instead highlight the cross-cultural interactions of the past and base our analyses and interpretive discussions in the comparative analysis of textual and visual sources available internationally in various museums, sites, and languages.² Thus, the cases we present come not only from Mongolia but also from different places in the world, such as Beijing, Prague, and Russia. We strongly believe that all of these cases contribute to our understanding of the specific practices, rituals, and culture of Mongolian Buddhism and, as such, are indispensable sources. The objects, sites, rituals, and texts we have

² In discussing Mongolian Buddhism, Johan Elverskog has pointed out the limitations that result from a greater dependence on Tibetan and Chinese sources. See Elverskog (2003, 2008).

selected for our research led us to seek the values and contexts of their emergence and development through active cultural interactions of Mongols with the rest of Asia, direct communications with China and Tibet, and indirect contacts with South and Central Asia.

The contributions to this special issue are organized chronologically, starting with a photo essay and related research article that initiate a discussion and analysis of findings from the seventeenth-century Saridag Monastery in northern Mongolia. This site, known from seventeenth-century textual sources as a major dharma seat of Khalkha reincarnate ruler—the First Jebtsundampa Zanabazar (1635–1723)—was only recently excavated by a team organized by the Institute of History and Archaeology at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Led by the institute’s director, historian Sampildondovin Chuluun, the excavation has revealed the foundations of twelve buildings, including a central assembly hall, and more than three thousand clay sculptures and monumental Buddha statues, some found with their consecrations, silver mandala plates, and other items. Chuluun’s photo essay provides a detailed description of the findings with impressive images illuminating the substance of the excavation. The research article by Uranchimeg Tsultemin places these findings in the cultural and political milieu of Qing-Géluk political rule over Outer Mongolia by the Jebtsundampa Khutugtus (Tib. *sprul sku*, reincarnations). These findings, heretofore unpublished in any scholarly venue, testify to the local production of Mongolian Buddhist sculptures in the 1680s and illuminate the practice that necessitated their production as well as cultural ties of the Mongols outside Tibet. The article discusses Zanabazar, commonly believed to be the Géluk protagonist whose alliance with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas was crucial to a later Buddhist dissemination in Khalkha Mongolia. However, the article argues that Zanabazar’s Géluk sectarian affiliation is a later Qing-Géluk construction to divert the initial Khalkha vision of him as a reincarnation of Jonang Tāranātha (1575–1634) and to subordinate him under the emerging political power of the Qing. Whereas several scholars have discussed the political significance of Zanabazar’s reincarnation, this article takes an interdisciplinary approach to discuss visual records in addition to textual sources that include Zanabazar’s portraits and current findings from the ongoing excavation of Zanabazar’s Saridag Monastery. Clay sculptures and Zanabazar’s own writings, heretofore little studied, suggest Zanabazar’s open attitude toward sectarian affiliations and his own vision, akin to Tsongkhapa’s, as inclusive of several traditions. Appropriation of Tibetan *thangka* painting tradition can be seen in the early eighteenth-century portrait of Zanabazar, in which a later style suggests a Mongol familiarity of the Qing court painting styles in Chengde.

In the second article, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz discusses the new developments of Mongolian Buddhism with the Fourth (1775–1813) Khutugtu. This article focuses on the topic of Shambhala as examined through Mongolian texts and a *thangka* currently held in Prague, which the author proves is Mongolian. As the author notes, Mongol interest in Shambhala in Mongolia took place with the spread of Kālacakra teachings and the subsequent addition of Kālacakra temples in Ikh Khüree and at other monastic

sites in Outer Mongolia and Buryatia in the early nineteenth century, despite the eighteenth-century Shambhala textual translations into Mongolian. Kollmar-Paulenz postulates that this heightened interest in Kālacakra and Shambhala is based on Mongol interest in the military aspects of the legend, which, in addition to the wish-prayers for a rebirth in Shambhala written by the Third Panchen Lama (1736–1780), triggered its increased politicization in the late nineteenth century in Mongolia and Inner Asia. The apocalyptic vision of war in Shambhala was attractive for lay and Buddhist protagonists in promoting the vision of associating Mongolia with Shambhala and the possibilities of rebirth in that mystic land. Paintings of Shambhala suggest the association of “others” in the war of Shambhala with non-Buddhists in general, and oftentimes with Muslims, thus distancing Buddhist and Muslim communities in the Qing empire. Further analyzing the depictions of Westerners as “others” in the *thangka*, Kollmar-Paulenz concludes that “they [the Mongols] were active players in a network of political, economic, and cultural connections that wove together China, Inner Asia, Russia, and Western European countries.” This article is supplemented with a photo essay by Buddhist historian Luboš Bělka, which provides a visual analysis and close look into the details and scenes of Shambhala depicted in the Prague *thangka*. Both Kollmar-Paulenz and Bělka convey that the details of the depiction suggest Mongol provenance of the painting.

Next, Vesna A. Wallace explores the question of the relation of text and image in an article that illuminates the production of illustrated manuscripts in Mongolia using a particular late-nineteenth century manuscript as a case study. Focusing on a Mongolized manuscript of a Buddhist didactic tale of Maudgalyāhana, or Molon Toyin, Wallace discusses an active dialogue between Mongolian translators, scribes, and artists and their Inner Asian neighbors, as evidenced from what she describes as “illustrated manuscripts of popular Buddhist tales [that] stand as witnesses to the process of translation.” On the other hand, Wallace also stresses the autonomy of the scribe’s interpretive rendering of the textual content based on its transmission to Mongolia originally from China and later from Tibet. As the author informs us, the tale was very popular with the Mongols from the seventeenth century onward and appeared in various forms: as xylograph printed translations from Tibetan, handwritten manuscripts, and illustrated manuscripts of the Mongolized version of the tale. This article is informative in many ways, disseminating important knowledge about the manuscript culture of Mongolia in general and relating to specific details of illustrated texts. The author shows how the Mongols, beyond merely receiving Buddhist texts via China and Tibet, were active translators of compound authorship of Buddhist narratives. Reinterpreting, adding humor and a happy ending, and adapting the narrative details to specifics of the Mongolian context through both textual and pictorial means helped to relate these Buddhist themes and didactic narratives from afar directly to a Mongolian lay audience.

A fourth article by Isabelle Charleux focuses on the similar theme of Mongol ways and rituals of appropriation, exploring the Mongolian worship of Boudhanath stupa of Nepal. Charleux begins by asking why the cult of the Nepalese Boudhanath

stupa reached Mongolia and why the stupa was chosen to be replicated in many Mongolian monasteries. Despite the relatively low number of pilgrims who were able to travel to Nepal in person, literary sources, visual reproductions of Boudhanath in paintings, architectural replicas, and xylograph prints established the ancient Newar site as a Jarung Khashar (Tib. *bya rung kha shor*), a distinguished object, and a site of worship. The author finds several Jarung Khashar stupas built at Mongolian monasteries, such as Khan Öndriin Khüree, Gandan in Ikh Khüree, Üüshin Juu of Ordos, and Kizhinga in Buryatia. The article regards these Mongolized replicas as “translations” of Boudhanath stupa as architecturally accessible for a local ritual of veneration and pilgrimage. As differentiated from any other types of stupas, these architectural replicas in Mongolian monasteries created their own style of this stupa in Mongolia, purportedly creating copies of Boudhanath stupa far away from Nepal. In their “translations” of Boudhanath stupa, Charleux shows, new iconographies and architectural forms were created with the common deities, such as Avalokiteśvara, and with internal shrines erected within the otherwise solid structure. In these transformations, Charleux maintains, the Mongol builders made selective use of Tibetan, Chinese, and Nepalese forms, ultimately connecting Jarung Khashar to local dharma practice.

Each of the contributions to this special issue offers an in-depth analysis of one particular theme pertaining to Mongolian Buddhist culture. Collectively, they demonstrate the specific ways—ritual, architectural, artistic, and textual (including translations and illustrated manuscripts)—through which we can deduce that the associations the Mongols built during the Qing were used to establish their own tradition of Buddhist culture. Unlike previous studies that aimed to define the unique features of Mongolian Buddhism, these articles and essays illuminate the cross-cultural networks during the Qing period in which the Mongol communities were active agents and bearers of transmission in some unexpected ways.

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