

Under the Himalayan Rain-shadow: The Painting Style of Thub chen Lha khang in Mustang and its Guge Connection

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ABSTRACT: The fifteenth century murals of the Kingdom of Mustang reflect the complexity and diversity of the broad Tibetan artistic sphere of that century. The variety of artistic production reveals the interactions of various cultures and their aesthetic idioms, and the explosion of indigenous development in upper Kali-Gandaki Valley. This article focuses on one of the most important monuments, the Thub chen Lha khang of Lo Manthang, a royal commission of the late fifteenth century, seeking to analyze the artistic style represented therein. The murals within this monastery are respective of the heyday of Kingdom of Mustang, revealing, however, a considerably different visual manifestation by comparison with that of their neighbor, Byams pa Lha khang, decades earlier, and other much earlier temples of Lo. This article aims to shed light on the distinctive artistic features found within the Thub chen Lha khang and then indicate the artistic connection between this monument and the contemporary Guge art to the west. Through stylistic analysis of chosen cases, this article intends to illustrate the characteristics of art particular to these two regions in the late fifteenth century. Additionally, it attempts to show how the art there was shaped and connected from a regional perspective; the information which lies beneath the visual appearance of the murals from both locations, which led to similarities and disparities in their manifestation; how this reflects the cultural-political context of each kingdom.

To the north of the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri range, as well as the end of the Kali-Gandaki



Fig. 1 Thub chen Lha khang (left) and Byams pa Lha khang (right), Mustang (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin, 2015).

valley, is a stretch of land in the shadow of Himalayas known as “Lo” (Glo bo) or “Mustang”. Existing borders mean that Mustang falls under the jurisdiction of Nepal, while for centuries, it remains independent as a Tibetan Buddhist cultural enclave. This isolated land, far from the main hub of Tibet and separate from the subcontinent, is the former domain of the ancient Buddhist Kingdom of Mustang, founded by A ma dpal (1388- ca.1456) in the fifteenth century. The area of Mustang is still not easy to reach, while the road through the valley has been busy for the past millennium. The Kali-Gandaki valley is a main trans-Himalayan trading route — a rare, direct path connecting the Indian subcontinent to the south with the northern Tibetan snow-land. This special, transitional geographic role has brought Mustang merchants, monks, and pilgrims, as well as fortune, Buddhism, and artistic wonders.

The monastery of Thub chen lha khang, otherwise known as the Mahamuni Temple, located within the walled capital of Mustang (Lo Manthang, Glo smos thang), was completed in 1472. Construction lasted five years under the patronage of the third Mustang King, Bkra

shis mgon (d. 1489?).¹ The construction of its neighboring Byams pa lha khang was completed around two decades earlier in 1448 (Fig. 1).² To ordain this newly built temple, Bkra shis mgon invited Sakya master Shakya mchog lden (1428-1507) to Mustang for its consecration.³ As for Byams pa Lha khang, the murals preserved in Thub chen Lha khang are some of the most incredible artistic masterpieces of the fifteenth century. Together, the monasteries mirror the heyday of both Buddhism and the artistic achievements of the Mustang Kingdom, as well as the unique Tibetan artistic style of the era.

The broader fifteenth-century Tibetan artistic sphere is regarded as an important epoch in Himalayan art history for two reasons. First, the Nepalese style, originating in the Kathmandu valley and spreading throughout the Himalayas and the Tibet plateau from the end of the twelfth century, reached its zenith around two centuries later when it became a universal artistic tradition adopted by patrons and artists from different regions.⁴ Second, it led to the emergence of many different new regional styles in Tibet owing to the continued artistic indigenization of the Nepalese aesthetic. The murals in the Gyanste Kumbum (Rgyal rtse sku 'bum) painted between 1425 and 1450 are particularly representative. The visual aspect of Gyantse Kumbum is considered a benchmark in the development of Tibetan Buddhist art, with external aesthetic

1 Vitali 1999: 4, 2012: 180; Jackson 2010: 153, 2011: 42. Several pieces of written evidence are provided in support of this date and patronage. For more discussion referring to the date and patronage of Thub chen Lha khang, see Heimbel, 2017: 309-312.

2 Byams pa Lha khang, or the Maitreya Temple, was completed in 1448, according to Vitali (Vitali 1999: 3, 2012: 167, see also footnote 261 and Alsop 2004: 131 and Heimbel 2017: 304). However, there seems to be discrepancy here regarding the completion date. Jackson states that Byams pa Lha khang was completed in 1447 after a ten-year construction period (Jackson 2010: 150, also see footnote 289). The temple was completed under the patronage of the second king of the Kingdom of Mustang, A mgon bzang po (1420-1482). On the other hand, Dowman (1997: 189) dates the Byams pa Lha khang to between 1424 to 1435.

3 Vitali 2012: 180-181. The earlier Byams pa Lha khang was also consecrated by the famous Sakya master Ngor chen kun dga' bzang po (1382-1456) during his last visit to Lo (1447-1449). See: Vitali 2012: 166-171. For further information about Ngor chen's third journey in Lo, see Heimbel 2017: 299-309.

4 Terms like *Nepalese-inspired style*, *Beri style*, *Tibeto-Newar style*, and the more common *Nepalese style* and *Newari Style*, are all rough appellations in Himalayan art history with basically the same meaning. They indicate a wide range of sub-styles within the Tibetan artistic sphere, mostly from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, employing Newari-inspired aesthetic idioms that originated in the Kathmandu Valley and were likely developed over time through continued contact. The visual manifestations of these imported aesthetic idioms vary according to their regional dissemination and their interactions with other elements. *Nepalese tradition*, is perhaps the most suitable umbrella term for any future attempt to encapsulate all of these artistic styles in a Tibetan context, including Nepalese artistic motifs. In this essay, however, the term *Nepalese style* will be applied.



Fig. 2 Assembly hall of Thub chen Lha khang (Photo: Raymond Wang, 2017).

elements interwoven with those of Tibetan artists across a range of different contexts.⁵ While the emergence of distinctive regional native Nepalese styles can be taken as a base, the distinctive regional features visually transcended the original Nepalese motifs.⁶ Further, they have been used to promote the emergence of the so-called “Tibetan indigenous styles.” Overall, it is not easy to define a specific fifteenth-century style via specific artistic motifs or elements. Patrons or artists subjectively adopted artistic elements from different cultures or regions to produce new artistic idioms and aesthetics. The reasons behind these new epochal aesthetics vary across the different sub-regions. In the broadest sense, art may thus be viewed as a type of visual language that mirrors the different cultural, political, or religious contexts of these regions.

This complex artistic sphere is the basis for the late fifteenth-century murals of Thub chen Lha khang. The unique style of the murals is hard to define as there are no earlier comparable examples or later successors, making it one of the most interesting exemplars in Himalayan art history. Based on previous studies, this essay aims to add to the body of research into the specific painting style seen in

5 Regarding the art historical meaning of the art of Gyantse Kumbum, I agree with the suggestion by Ricca and Lo Bue (1993), and Jackson (2010) that it merely represents the birth of the development of Tibetan indigenous styles, and not a fully mature Tibetan art (Ricca 1997: 198; Tucci 1941b, cited in Ricca and Lo Bue 1993: 27). The different-origin artistic elements displayed are not completely amalgamated and sometimes represented independently.

6 The terms *Gyantse style* or *Gyantse school* are generally used to describe the Gyantse Kumbum murals and other synchronous works, mostly in the Tsang area of Tibet. These terms are now widely used in Tibetan art history (Ricca 1997). Some studies, however, still view it as a sub-style of the Nepalese style (Jackson 2010: 147).



Fig. 3 Bodhisattvas images on the east wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.
(Photo: Raymond Wang, 2017).

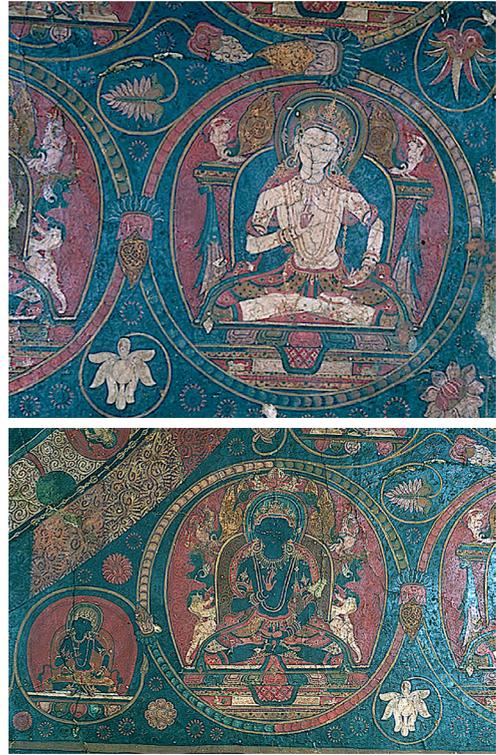


Fig. 4 Buddhas images on the south wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.
(Photo: Raymond Wang, 2017).

this monastery, with the wider goal of creating a more vivid perspective of Mustang art. The focus will be twofold: first, how the art in situ communicates with its broader contemporary artistic sphere; and, second, how the visual manifestation relates to a specific regional social and cultural context. My argument is that there is a stylistic connection between the painting style of Thub chen Lha khang and the contemporaneous art of Guge to the west. This will be illustrated by comparing the murals of Thub chen Lha khang with those of the earlier neighboring monument, Byams pa Lha khang of Lo Manthang, and contemporaneous murals from the monasteries in west Himalayas, such as the Red Temple of Tsaprang (Lha khang dmar po) and the Golden Hall of Tabo (Serkhang) in Guge. A stylistic comparison between these late fifteenth-century synchronous sites may indicate that, while there are certainly differences in the details, there is a definite convergence to the artwork seen in Thub chen Lha khang and other sites in Western Tibet during the period in question.



Fig. 5 Mural from the second floor of Byams pa Lha khang, Mustang, mid-15th C. (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin, 2015).



Figs. 6, 7 Mural from the second floor of Byams pa Lha khang, Mustang, mid-15th C. (Photo: Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman, 2003).

Unlike its earlier three-story neighbor, Byams pa Lha khang, Thub chen Lha khang is a one-story building with a grand assembly hall (Fig. 2). Its main artistic heritage is the murals, the surviving parts of which include the six Bodhisattva portraits on the East Wall (Fig. 3) and the eight Buddha portraits on the South Wall (Fig. 4). Each Buddha or Bodhisattva is accompanied by two attending Bodhisattvas, with decorative background elements. Since 2011, these murals have been undergoing a restoration program under the patronage of the American Himalayan Foundation.⁷

Except for the murals on the replaced North Wall, which are clearly from a later date, the consistent painting style reveals a specific, complex form of visual expression. This style is an example of the flourishing of an indigenous art in the fifteenth century Tibetan artistic sphere

⁷ This essay does not address the controversy surrounding the Thub chen Lha khang restoration program, which mainly relates to the repainting plan that started at 2009. For a more detailed discussion of this plan, see Fieni 2010; Luczanits 2012; and Sandy 2012.



Figs. 8, 9 Mural from Luri Caves, Mustang, 13th C. (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin, 2015).



Fig. 10 Mural from Konchokling Cave, early 14th C. (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin, 2015).



a



b

Fig. 11 Buddha on the south wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

a. Photoed by Raymond Wang in 2017;

b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

and is distinct from the painting style of Byams pa Lha khang from earlier decades (Figs. 5, 6, 7) or any other earlier styles elsewhere in the Mustang district (Figs. 8, 9, 10).⁸ Previous studies relating to the murals of Thub chen Lha khang have discussed the murals' stylistic multiplicity. Also, for instance, emphasizes the lavish palette and complex decoration featuring elaborate dress and jewelry compared to the murals of Byams pa Lha khang, the style of which is closer to earlier Sakya examples and which feature classic Nepalese aesthetic idioms. Thub chen Lha khang's murals, however, display a considerable visual diversity that points to a further development of the Tibetan style in which the motifs derived from other sources such as Chinese or west Tibetan/Kashmiri-inspired manner are involved.⁹ Also suggests that the murals of this late-fifteenth-century site bear a closer association with the Tibetan indigenous derivative Gyantse art.¹⁰ Jackson, for his part, groups the murals as an ornate, highly developed

8 Studies of early Mustang monuments and their murals include (selected): Dowman 1997; Alsop 2004; Neumann and Neumann 2010; Lo Bue 2010; Luczanits 2014; Beck 2014.

9 Alsop 2004: 136.

10 Alsop 2004: 136.

form of Beri.¹¹ Luczanits, meanwhile, suggests that the painting style is a unique blend of Western Tibet and Newari art.¹²

Fig. 11a shows one of the Buddha images on the Thub chen south wall in which several of the visual features common to the Thub chen Lha khang murals are apparent. The bottom part of the mural is not original, as can be seen from the pre-restoration photographs (Fig. 11b), but has been repainted with reference to the more-intact portrait on the west wall (Fig. 12). What is clear, however, is the expressive intent, the grandiosity and splendidity of the dominant figure, as well as the complex surrounding decoration. The composition is different in layout to other classic Nepalese paintings, although all the figural and decorative elements retain an orderly arrangement. The intensive nature of the layout leaves very little in the way of space. Like most traditional Nepalese-style arts, the palette of choice is red, while other colors — in particular green, as well as gold and orange — are also widely used. The Buddha has an unusually short neck, while his elongated torso and other physical features — the heart-shaped head, bowed eyes, and the front-profile ears — are common to the broader Nepalese aesthetic.

Another Bodhisattva image on the east wall (see Fig.13a and 13b) allows for further stylistic characterization. The Nepalese aesthetic elements — the heart-shaped face, centralized tear-drop jewels adorning the crown, the foliate scrollwork decorating the throne base, and the vegetal background motifs — are once again well represented. These universal Nepalese motifs are also accompanied with some regional native motifs. As for the Buddha portrait, the Bodhisattva portraits feature short necks and rigid limbs. The figures are dressed in especially heavy clothes adorned by flower patterns, and the portraits in a serried layout. Taken



Fig. 12 Buddha on the west wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C. (Photo: Luigi Fieni).

11 Jackson 2010: 156.

12 Luczanits 2013: 194. Vitali 1999: 14-15.

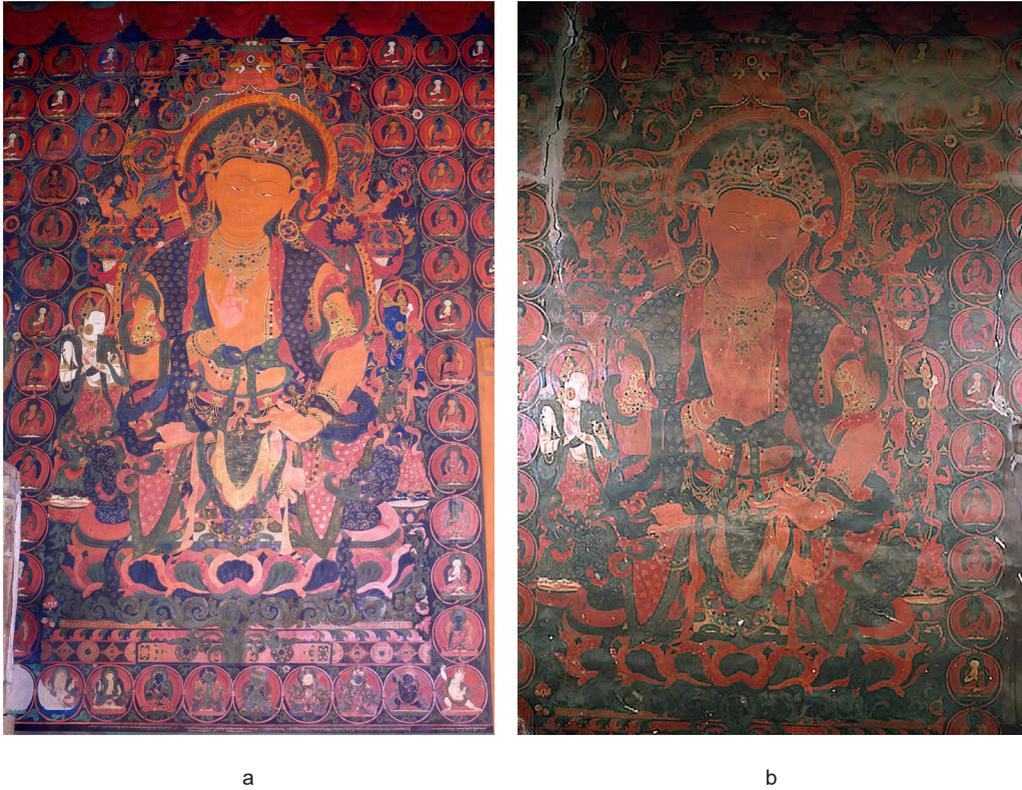


Fig. 13 Bodhisattva on the east wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C..

a. Photoed by Zhang Chaoyin in 2015; b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

together, these elements convey a static, solemn impression. The physical expression of the figures in the Thub chen Lha khang portraits is generally somewhat restrained, with a lack of postural relaxation. The diminished use of shadow also gives the portraits a less three-dimensional aspect, reducing the sense of expressive realism — a technique similar to that used in icons.

Stylistically, the Thub chen Lha khang's painting style is a typical example that reflects the dynamic artistic development of the era. As for the murals of Byams pa Lha khang, we can state that these murals belong to the general genre of the Nepalese style, and that the elements are broadly consistent with a recognizable Nepalese aesthetic. However, closer comparison of the Thub chen Lha khang murals with those on the second floor of Byams pa Lha khang reveals significant differences between the respective styles (see Fig. 5-7). While the paintings on both sites do belong to a group of regional derivatives, they were clearly painted from different aesthetic standpoints. The murals of Thub chen Lha khang have a much more sophisticated

presentation. The sumptuous detail and static visual expressions, the attention to detail, the fine lining and the plentiful use of color are in many ways a far cry from the traditional Nepalese aesthetic. A comparison of the mid-fifteenth-century portraits of royal-patronized Byams pa Lha khang and the thirteenth-to fourteenth-century murals in remote heritage sites such as Luri Cave (Dlu ri) (see Figs. 8-9), Konchokling Cave (Dkon mchog gling)(see Fig.10),¹³ and Tashi Kabum (Bkra shis dge gling mchod rten),¹⁴ allows us to map chronologically artistic development in the Mustang region. Clearly, the Nepalese aesthetic from south of the Himalayas has blended with the complementary local aesthetic idioms. The murals of the early caves are classically Nepalese, with some native features, reflecting the spread of the Nepalese style from the Kathmandu valley. The painting style seen in Byams pa Lha khang, completed around 1440-1450, is a continuation of this trend.¹⁵ Mainly based on the Nepalese aesthetic, there are also early fifteenth-century Gyantse style elements mixed with local aesthetic idioms. Together, these create emotional imagery featuring elegant, dynamic brushwork, much like the other Nepalese-inspired styles. By contrast, the more lavish and decorative late fifteenth-century murals of Thub chen Lha khang may be viewed as having a more “courtly” aesthetic. This stylistic change may indicate that the patrons or artists commissioning or painting the murals of Thub chen Lha khang may have used a source external to the general regional model of the time.

An artistic connection between the murals of Thub chen Lha khang and the indigenous styles seen in the murals in Southern Tibetan monasteries, such as Gyanste Kumbum, is generally suggested by Alsop.¹⁶ It is true that many artistic elements seen in the Thub chen Lha khang murals share similar features with the art of Gyantse Kumbum. This may be in response to the broad indigenous evolutions taking place within the fifteenth-century Tibetan artistic sphere. The adoption of Nepalese artistic elements and decorative motifs taken from Chinese art, among others, is evident at both sites. However, aside from differences in certain detailed motifs, the style of the Thub chen Lha khang murals is considerably more precise and “courtly” than that of the Gyantse murals. The latter were painted in a notably, freer more fluid way,

13 The date of the Konchokling murals remains unknown as there is no direct evidence by which to date them. I agree with Luczanits, who suggests that they are early 14th-century. For further discussion see Luczanits 2014.

14 For the introduction and photos of Tashi Kabum, see Beck 2014: 243-247.

15 The artistic style of the murals on the second floor of Byams pa Lha khang is another case, albeit beyond the scope of this essay. It should be noted that Nepalese artists were also involved in the murals of Vajradhatu Mandala (Alsop 2004: 135). Some of the murals, like the one displaying the Trailokyavijaya, are associated, to a certain extent, with the murals of the Gyanste Kumbum (Dowman 1997: 192-195; Vitali 1999: 21). Given the construction dates of Gyantse Kumbum and Byams pa Lha khang, it is highly likely that the artists who painted the Gyantse murals were also commissioned for those at Byams pa Lha khang.

16 Alsop, 2004: 136.



Fig. 14 Murals from Gyantse Kumbum, first half of the 15th C. (HAR 67492).



Fig. 15 Buddha from the Red Temple of Tsaprang, Western Tibet, late 15th C. (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin).

as can be seen in the depiction of the Bodhisattva's torso,¹⁷ or the pendent folds on Buddha's robe (see Fig. 11a, b and Fig. 14). Moreover, the shading technique that was frequently used in Gyantse paintings for creating three-dimensionality in facial features, torsos, and limbs is less prominent in Thub chen Lha khang. Other than these visual and technical aspects, the way in which the artworks would have been viewed in the artistic context of the day is also worthy of consideration. When considering the possible origins of the unusual artistic style seen at Thub chen Lha khang, the art of Gyantse, which was completed about thirty years earlier, could be considered at least an indirect source. Likewise, it is a worthwhile exercise to look for other contemporary murals with comparable stylistic features.

One possible comparison is from another late fifteenth-century artistic stronghold in the Tibetan plateau, to the west of Mustang. Located on the other side of Himalayas, the new Guge Kingdom emerged into a wealthy force where the ancient Ye shes 'od Purang-Guge Kingdom (Pu hrang Gu ge) used to be. A series of construction and rebuilding programs dedicated to the Gelug school were commissioned by the royal families, initially, and later by other regional patrons.¹⁸ The works in the collections, patronized by royalty — the murals from the royal

17 For an example of the Bodhisattva portrait in Kyantse Kumbum, see: Ricca and Lo Bue, 1993: 130, plate 11.

18 Kerin 2015b: 117.

monasteries of Tholing (Tho ling), Tsaprang, and Tabo painted from 1450 to circa 1520 — are considered the apogee of Guge art.¹⁹ However, the question of how to situate the so-called Guge style within the wider history of Tibetan art remains unresolved. This topic has been widely discussed by scholars owing to the mixture of visual vocabularies, including artistic idioms from tenth to twelfth-century Western Tibet, the more developed Nepalese style, the Gyantse style, and continuing indigenization²⁰. I agree with Kerin, who describes the Guge artistic style as a deliberate archaism based on the broader fifteenth-century Nepalese style, which was still evolving at the time and which painstakingly revived the aesthetic idioms of the ancient Western Tibet style of the Purang-Guge Kingdom. From this perspective, the murals can be viewed as a visual metaphor for royal continuity and the political and cultural links to Ye shes 'od's Kingdom.²¹

Comparisons can also be made between the murals of Thub chen Lha khang and the Red Temple of Tsaprang (Mchod khang dmar po) in Guge. The Red Temple of Tsaprang belongs to a complicated building context that once constituted the royal residence of the Guge Kingdom between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries and was likely patronized by the wife of the Guge King Blo bzang rab brtan, Don grub ma, between 1475 and 1500 (or between 1470 and 1490 according to another study).²² Its interior space, like the Thub chen Lha khang, is also a large assembly hall (66 feet long and 59 feet wide), with huge murals painted on the surrounding walls. Unlike the earlier murals of the neighboring White Temple of Tsaprang or the Red Temple of Tholing, which convey a strong intention to revive the style and motifs of tenth-to twelfth-century Western Tibet, the paintings featured in the Red Temple of Tsaprang are intended as the next development of the Guge style. Even here, however, the artistic idioms from the early Western Tibet style are still apparent, particularly in the physical features of the main figures. The artists constructing the Red Temple murals were seeking to define and develop a Guge style that reflected the late fifteenth-century contemporary aesthetic.

19 Kerin 2015b: 121.

20 Scholarly opinions about the definitions of fifteenth- to seventeenth-century Guge artistic style vary. Some see it as a continuation of the eleventh century Western Tibet style (Neumann 1999: 80, Stoddard 1996: 44); others, meanwhile, see it as a regional variant of the Newari-inspired style (Pal 1984: 102; Jackson 2010: 157-160). The viewpoint that Guge painting is the successor of the Gyantse style that flourished in Tsang from 1400 to 1450 could also roughly be included in the latter group (Rhie 1991: 57; 1999: 64). A third perspective, and the one adopted by this essay, is that the fifteenth-century art of the Guge Kingdom was a deliberate archaistic revival of the eleventh-century Western Tibet style, and a visual metaphor for royal continuity with the Guge-Purang Kingdom (Kerin 2015a: 152). In this essay the term Guge style is adopted to imply this group of art and its artistic manifestation.

21 Kerin 2015a: 152.

22 See Kerin 2015b: 120; Petech 1997: 245; Henss 1996: 208. The exact date of the murals of the Red Temple of Tsaprang is still unclear. Most studies suggest the late fifteenth century, which is generally accepted from a stylistic point of view. For further discussion of the painting style of this monument, see Chen 2018: 143-151.



a



b

Fig. 16 Buddha on the south wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

a. Photoed by Zhang Chaoyin in 2015; b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

Despite evident differences, a quick glance at the murals of Thub chen Lha khang and its contemporary Guge counterpart, the Red Temple of Tsaprang, reveals some general artistic similarities (See Fig. 11a, b, Fig. 13a, b for Thub chen Lha khang and Fig. 15 for the Red Temple of Tsaprang). The artwork inside both royal monasteries is strongly inclined toward images of courtly grandiosity. In both instances, the main figures occupy a relatively high proportion of each composition, with medallions containing minor figures spread across the background and vegetal motifs filling the excess space. The heavy red-green dominated palette with auxiliary orange and gold is a feature of both sites, as are the widespread use of coating and the lack of shadow. These artistic idioms accent a static, even somewhat stiff expression — an elaborate and formative trend that is visible in both sites. However, a notable difference in terms of the background is that the murals in the Red Temple of Tsaprang have a much looser composition. As mentioned previously, this is probably an aesthetic idiom of Mustang origin not seen elsewhere. In the Red Temple murals, the space between the two pillars is wide enough to enclose the two attending Bodhisattvas.

The main visual difference between the two sites is in the depiction of the main figures.



a



b

Fig. 17 Green Tara on the east wall of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

a. Photoed by Zhang Chaoyin in 2015;

b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

Figs.15 and 16a both depict a sitting Buddha whose facial and physical characteristics come from different traditions and reflect their own regional aesthetics. The Tsaprang Buddha (ovoid head, round and small ushnisha, widow's peak, straight upper eyelids, pursed mouth, and characteristic incomplete chin-line with the use of shading to provide the full contour) is a facially distinctive Guge style after the ancient Kashmiri-inspired Western Tibet style. The Thub chen Buddha, meanwhile, is generally executed in the Nepalese tradition (heart-shape head, bowed eyes, and the form of the ears). Also, the neck of the Thub chen Buddha is shorter than that of the Guge. However, the nose of the Thub chen Buddha follows the Western Tibet model, with a subtle line showing the bridge of the nose to be absent. The monastic garments of the Buddhas are extremely similar, their patchwork motifs featuring golden embellishments and blue or green linings, with intricate embroidery. This representation can be traced back to eleventh-century examples in Western Tibet.

Aside from the above, further similarities are evident in the elements surrounding the



Fig. 18 White Tara in the Red Temple of Tsaprang, Western Tibet, late 15th C.
(Photo: Zhang Chaoyin)

composition. Here, while the nimbuses are represented in various ways, the motifs of the backrests of the main figures, both of which represent legendary creatures, are similar. Both murals depict makaras, whose foliate tails make up the swirling top of the backrests and are of Nepalese origin. In both instances, the decorative top scrollwork motif is painted in a similarly exquisite, detailed manner. The red, green indigo, and gold palette also features multicolored curled elements. To this extent, it differs with earlier scrollwork seen in Gyantse Kumbum or Byams pa Lha khang, which feature a single gold color and a simpler design (see Fig. 6 and Fig. 14). Looking downwards, the side constructions supporting the backrest's top arches in both murals show two popular types of late-Nepalese style. The supporting elements of the Thub chen Lha khang murals feature animals arrayed one above the other, while the Tsaprang mural has columns with two vegetal parts, each with an overhanging lotus. Each pillar is thick

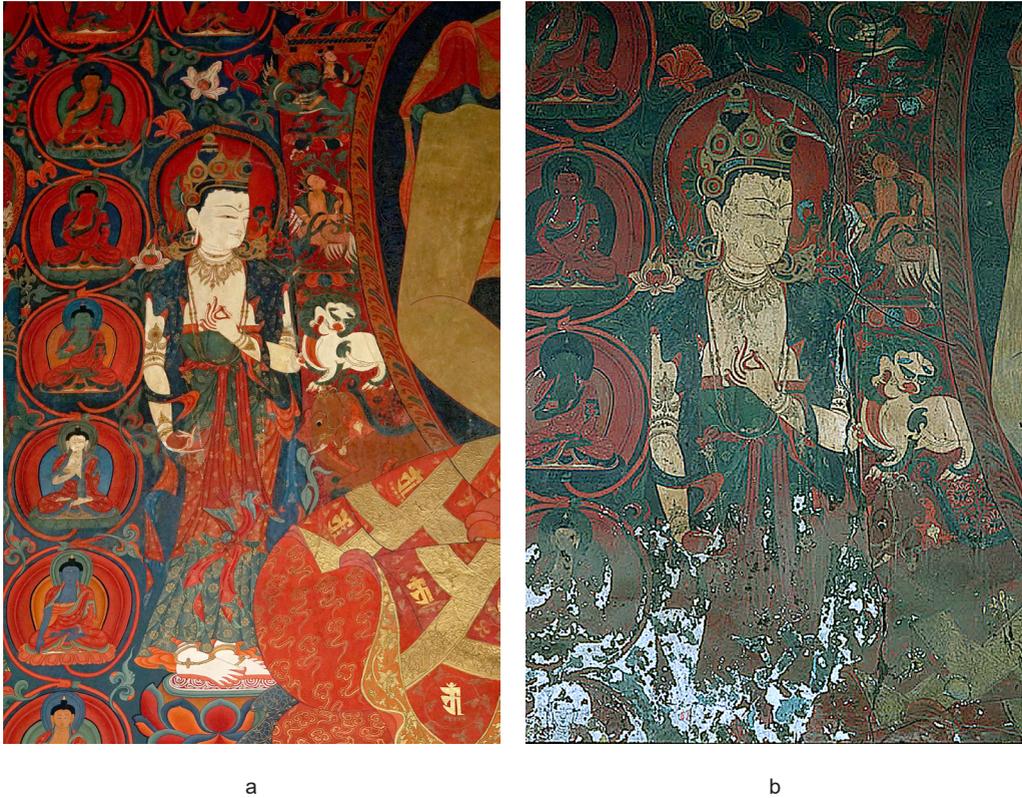


Fig. 19 Attending Bodhisattva in Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

a. Photoed by Raymond Wang in 2017; b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

enough to include a shrine, with mythic animals enclosed within the lower part. In terms of the painting methods, the mural of the Red Temple of Tsaprang, as for other Guge examples, uses a heavy outline, in contrast to the more delicate lines seen in the Mustang murals.

The disparities and similarities between the art of Thub chen Lha khang and the Red Temple of Tsaprang are further illustrated by another comparison between a Mahabodhisattva, probably a Green Tara, from Thub chen Lha khang (Fig. 17a, b), and a White Tara from the Red Temple of Tsaprang (Fig. 18). The Thub chen Lha khang Tara, with her wide and solid torso and her delicately rendered heavy clothes, is a regional derivative evolving from the late-Nepalese artistic tradition. As previously, the countenance and physical features of the two contain regional aesthetic idioms: the Mustang icon reflects the Nepalese tradition, and the Guge icon the Western Tibet tradition. However, the palette and the form of the elaborate whorls decorating the top of the backrests are remarkably similar. To some extent, the green-red palette of the deities' garments is also comparable. The sophistication in the pleats of the clothes

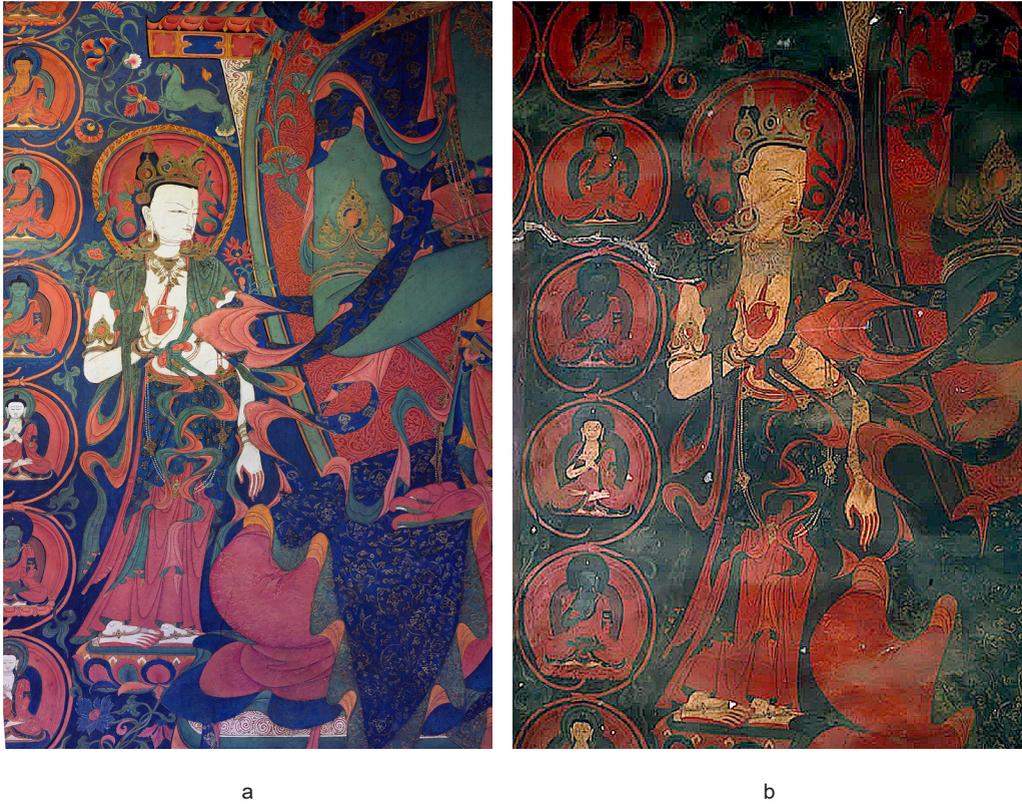


Fig. 20 Attending Bodhisattva in Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

a. Photoed by Raymond Wang in 2017; b. Photoed by Philip Lieberman and Marcia R. Lieberman in 2003.

and the embroidered floral motif highlighted in gold create a decorous yet strong impression. Another noticeable element is the nimbus halos behind the figures, which are created using a similar method and intended to highlight the fretworks.

The attending Bodhisattvas in the Thub chen Lha khang murals also provide clues as to a possible association with Guge art. Compared to the main figures, the facial details of the Thub chen Lha khang attending Bodhisattva share more similarities with its Guge counterpart. In his 2004 article, Alsop provides an interesting photo showing a Thub chen Lha khang attending Bodhisattva that includes clear Western Tibet artistic elements.²³ The figure in this portrait has arched eyebrows, almond-shaped eyes, heavy lips, and clearly a delineated nose, jawline, and

23 For the photo, see Alsop 2004: 138, Fig. 12. In Alsop's article, he describes this portrait as consciously drawn in a Western Tibet, Kashmir-inspired manner. Also see Alsop 2004: 136 for his comments.



Fig. 21 Attending Bodhisattva in the Red Temple of Tsaprang, Western Tibet, late 15th C. (Photo: Zhang Chaoyin).

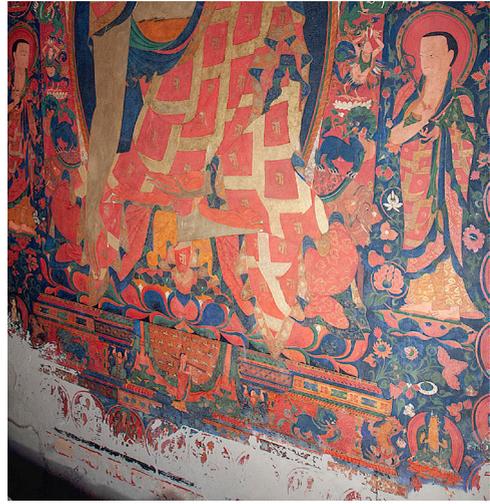


Fig. 22 Weight-bearing figure motif in Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C. (Photo: L. Fieni).

neck. Her crown is composed of large pointed triangular plaques, a form common to figures of both the Western Tibet and Guge style. This portrait is reminiscent of the Vajrapani portrait in the Red Temple of Tsaprang published by Neumann in an earlier article.²⁴ Fig. 19a and Fig. 20a show other attending Bodhisattva portraits in Thub chen Lha khang, both of which feature the traditional Western Tibetan almond eyes. Comparison of the two Thub chen portraits with the Tsaprang examples (Fig. 21) shows the expression of the Bodhisattvas' torsos to be highly convergent. Both the Thub chen and Tsaprang Bodhisattvas display an elegant, elongated “S”-shaped curve, with the waist and hips slightly to one side. The artists also use a similar method to depict the motifs on the garments. There is a similar weightiness to the Mustang deities' *dhotis*, the same red-green palette, the same emphasis on sumptuous embroidered patterns and the lines representing the wrinkles in the fabric, and the same shawl flowing around the shoulders and body with its embroidered golden floral motif.

Other elements in the Thub chen Lha khang may be further indication of its possible links to the decorative schema of its late fifteenth-century Guge counterpart. Similarities can be observed in the throne bases (see Fig. 22 and Fig. 23), both of which have a receding construction, vegetal supporting elements, and multi-color inlay decoration. Similarly, both feature weight-bearing figures painted on the base (Fig. 24). This motif, which originated from

²⁴ see Fig. 21 and Neumann 1999: 80, Fig. 13.

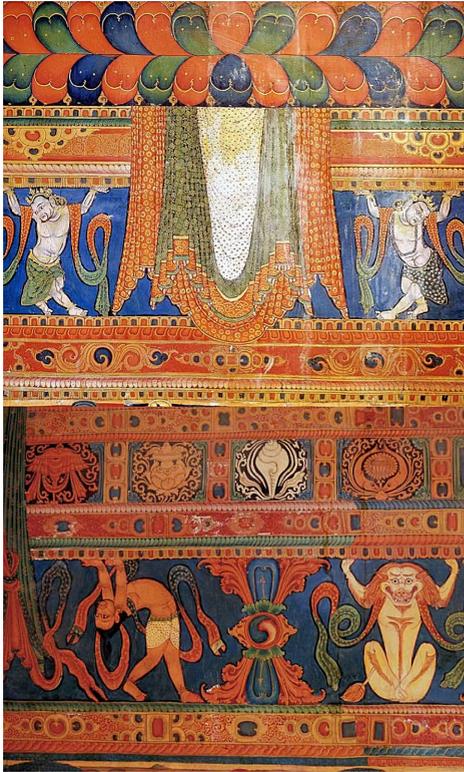


Fig. 23 Detail from Fig. 7, the throne base of the Tsaprang Buddha.

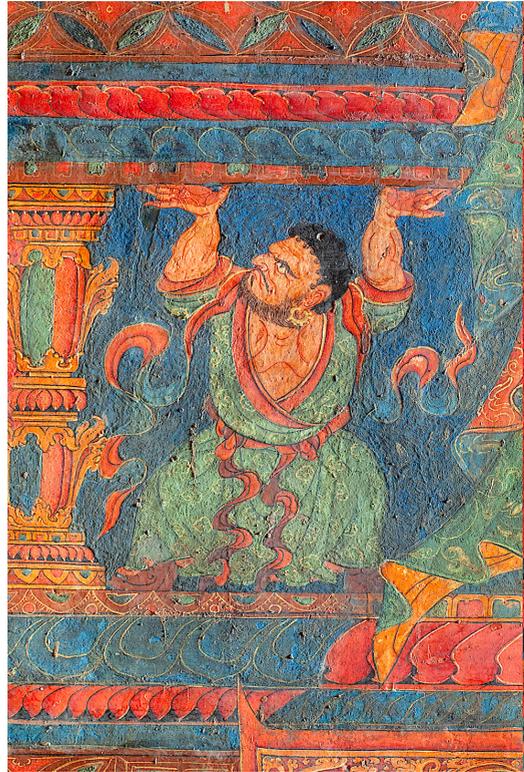


Fig. 24 Weight-bearing figure in the murals of Thub chen Lha khang, Mustang, late 15th C.

the early Hellenistic art of Gandhara and was later inherited by Kashmiri art, is reminiscent of the early Western Tibet-style murals, such as the eleventh-century paintings in Dungkar,²⁵ and is a feature of the fifteenth-century Tsaprang murals (see Fig. 25). Some aesthetic idioms are clearly shared by the two Atlas figures, including the Chinese-style clothes, the very similar brushwork used to depict the lines of their clothes and torsos, and the use of slight shading to produce a three-dimensional expression.

In terms of background decoration, the most characteristic aspects of the two monuments is the abundant repeated vegetal motifs, with meandering vines in dark green and bright red lotus decorating the dark blue background (Fig. 26 and Fig. 27). This popular motif matured after the Gyantse style in the first half of the fifteenth century, and was widely used by artists in

²⁵ Kerin 2015a: 169.

Tibetan paintings in the following century for murals and thangkas.²⁶ The vegetal idiom has many derivative forms. In some cases, the way of painting the leaf motif and the general palette used in Thub chen Lha khang closely resemble that of the Red Temple of Tsaprang, with their highly developed and meticulous brushwork. However, they are dissimilar from earlier Mustang vegetal motifs, such as those in Byams pa Lha khang, as they show the vegetal pattern in a less sophisticated way.²⁷ Another element shared by the two sites that may also have a Gyantse antecedent is the background cloud motif. These cloud patterns are usually colored orange-red or dark green, and probably have their origins in Chinese painting.²⁸

Apart from the Red Temple of Tsaprang, in the famous monastic complex of Tabo in Spiti, the murals preserved in the Golden Hall (Serkhang) are also comparable with the murals Thub chen Lha khang. The interior murals are said to be constructed during the third quarter of the fifteenth century in the Guge kingdom²⁹, which, like the murals of the Red Temple of Tsaprang, show the Guge style in the fifteenth

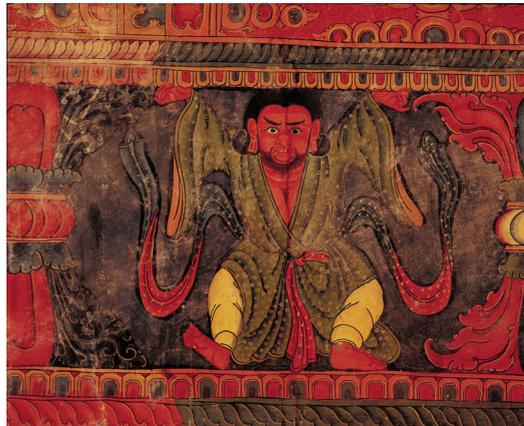


Fig. 25 Weight-bearing figure in the murals of the Red Temple of Tsaprang, Guge.

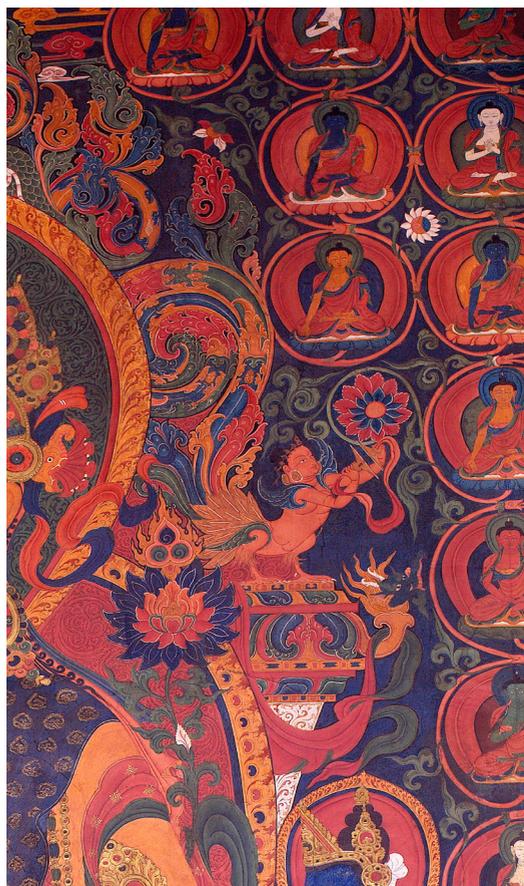


Fig. 26 Details of Fig. 7, the decorative motif on the murals of Thub chen Lha khang.

26 A painting example in the fifteenth century Western Tibet showing the vegetal motif is a Shakyamuni Buddha thangka from the Virginia Museum of Fine Art. See Kerin 2015: 163, Fig. 3.10.

27 For photographs showing this motif, see Jackson 2010, Fig. 7.21b and 7.24

28 Ricca 1997: 208.

29 Vitali 1999: 39 cited in van Ham 2015: 222.



Fig. 27 Vegetal design on the mural of the Red Temple in Tsaprang, Guge (HAR: no. 36115).



Fig. 28 Mahasiddhas surrounding Vajradhara in the Golden Hall of Tabo, Spiti Valley, Western Himalayas, in the third quarter of the 15th C. (van Ham, 2015: 218).

century. One example the image of Vajradhara and attending Bodhisattvas associated with mahasiddhas (Fig. 28). From a comparison between this portrait and the peaceful deity portrait in Thub chen Lha khang (Fig. 17), it is possible to note many similarities in adopted aesthetic idioms — even more than the previous comparison between the murals of Thub chen Lha khang and the Red Temple of Tsaprang. Apart from the scale of the main deity and the abundant usage of heavy bright colors — red, green, and particularly gold — in the two monuments which express splendid grandiosity, it is remarkable that the Golden Hall mural especially adopts a form of a very narrow composition that is closer to the Thub chen murals, performing the staggered arrangement in the main figure and attending deities. Similarities are further found from the depiction of the main deity, Vajradhara. The static expression represented by the main figure, as well as his short neck and heavily embroidered dhoti, together inform a similar aesthetic understanding with the Thub chen Lha khang murals. From a stylistic perspective, the primary difference between the two is again the physical features of

the deities. The Vajradhara painted on the Golden Hall murals clearly, or somehow deliberately, adopts the elements from Kashmiri-inspired Western Tibetan tradition, such as the almond-like eyes, twisted waist, navel muscle, and heavy shading, differing from its Thub chen counterpart in the Nepalese tradition. The resemblance can further be seen from the depiction of attending Bodhisattvas. Like the main figure, the physical features are inspired by the Western Tibetan tradition, whereas the method of depicting the elegant S-curve torso, the soft and flying shawl, and detailed fold lines depicted on the multi-tier dhoti are evidence of similar aesthetics that are also shared by the Thub chen murals.

The aforementioned clues from the murals seen in these monuments suggest the possible presence of a particular late fifteenth-century artistic sphere shared by both the Guge and Mustang. Even though the methods used in both differ, inevitably, in the details, particularly in the facial and physical features of the main figures, the similarities are still indicative of shared aesthetic idioms that spread throughout the two kingdoms between 1450 and 1500. Both contain the main artistic elements that broadly characterize the fifteenth-century context: the development of universal Nepalese artistic elements; indigenous evolutions; and the emergence of regional styles. However, resources demonstrating the artistic connection between the two Buddhist kingdoms during this period are still far from sufficient. Aside from the trade routes that led to a consistent interaction between the Kali-Gandaki valley and Western Tibet, other historical factors may help to shed light on the artistic connections between Guge and Mustang. First, during most of the second half of the fifteenth century, the Purang area of Western Tibet was under the control of the Mustang Kingdom.³⁰ Another relevant factor may have been the matrimonial bond that tied between the royal families of Mustang and Guge. It is a matter of record that A mgon bzang po, the second king of Mustang, married the sister of the Guge king in 1434. Bkra shis mgon himself also married a Guge princess between 1475 and 1500.³¹ It is thus highly likely that these political events were accompanied by the forging of artistic links, from communications between artists to the import and export of scroll paintings.

Differences between the artwork of the two sites are evident, especially in the depiction of the main figures. This is likely attributable to the desire of the rulers to reflect their own regional context, probably out of political considerations, as Kerin has suggested in interpreting the origins of the fifteenth-century Guge style. In Western Tibet, the emergence of the Guge style is regarded as a visual semiotic system intended to evoke the ideological message of political success, thereby linking this new Guge Kingdom with Ye shes 'od's tenth-to twelfth-century Purang-Guge Kingdom. This was done both to fashion its political identity and to respond to shifting religious alliances with the newly established Gelugpa.³² This same logic

30 Vitali 2012: 165.

31 Vitali 2012: 152, 178.

32 Kerin 2015a: 153-154; 2015b: 159-164.

could also be applied to Mustang. Many of the aesthetic idioms adopted in murals of this late fifteenth-century Mustang temple preserve a relatively conservative Nepalese style, particularly in the facial features of the main figures, which may be reflective of its close relationship with the Sakya branch Ngorpa (Ngor pa). The multi-level murals in Byams pa Lha khang show the different stages of Buddhist practice and are very much monastic and religious in intent. The grandiose, “courtly” murals of Thub chen Lha khang, meanwhile, can be viewed as having more of a propaganda function, stressing the predominant position of the Kingdom of Mustang in the Western Tibet political context of the late fifteenth century.

Much more work is needed to acquire a solid understanding of the wonders of Thub chen Lha khang and its connection with other artworks, from both contemporary and chronological perspectives. My preliminary evaluation of the artistic style of the murals of Thub chen Lha khang is that it tends to reflect a new regional Tibetan indigenous style. This falls into the same artistic sphere as the late fifteenth-century Guge style, with which it shares some aesthetic idioms but is nevertheless distinguishable. However, this distinction does not deny the artistic association between the styles of these late fifteenth-century Mustang murals and the murals of Gyantse Kumbum or Byams pa Lha khang painted several decades earlier. The style of Thub chen Lha khang murals is neither a direct continuation of the other two sites nor an extension of earlier Nepalese-style art in Mustang. Stylistically, the Thub chen Lha khang murals can be placed between 1450 and 1500 — a period when the widespread Nepalese aesthetic elements actively integrated various regional aesthetics, which in turn stimulated indigenous evolutions. These indigenous features ultimately transcended their Nepalese origin, shifting to other regions to become universal idioms and providing the momentum for another wave of regional variation. Nepalese aesthetic idioms are found in and constitute the artistic base for both the late fifteenth-century art of Mustang and Guge. However, these idioms are limited to decorative motifs. Identifying the regional native features is the key to remodeling the visual depictions and refining our definitions of the different styles. The Thub chen Lha khang murals thus reflect the aesthetic of the day, and can be viewed as a sophisticated visual symbol of a subjective selection process. Comparison with the aesthetic idioms seen in the Red Temple of Tsaprang in Western Tibet indicates the popularity of a common “courtly” aesthetic. As discussed, both sites share a late fifteenth-century aesthetic, with similarities in terms of visual expression, palette, and multiple details. The differences between the two, meanwhile, especially in the features of the main figures, are nevertheless distinguishable. This can be, most likely, attributed to the varying preferences of their respective patrons.

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