2 ASIAN ART PROFILE

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ASIAN ART NEWS PAPER: Growing up in Tibet in the 1960s and 1970s, where the exposure to contemporary art was minimal, what led you to become a contemporary artist?

GONKAR GYATSO: When they are little, all children like to draw, and I was no exception. As I finishing middle school in Tibet, I never thought I was going to be an artist. What I do remember is that I wanted to become a farmer, over the traditional kind, but the modern farmer who would drive tractors, and use modern technology. That was my dream. Somehow, by chance in 1977, I got a job at the museum in Lhasa when I was seventeen. At the time, the museum was reasonably well known for its exhibitions, and they were looking for a young graduate who could speak good Chinese and Tibetan to work as a guide to these exhibitions. Through that job, I met a few artists at the museum had two or three professionally trained artists working for them. Naturally, they influenced me and encouraged me. I went out with them to do sketches, and my relationship with them nurtured my desire to become an artist.

AAN: Where did you acquire your artistic skills?

GG: Interestingly, I never had any training in Lhasa. I began to consider art seriously when I got the job at the museum although I was simply a tour guide. The museum job left me with a fair amount of spare time that I spent with other artists—two Chinese and one Tibetan. They became my mentors, and I would spend a lot of time with them. Back then, there were no art schools or art colleges in Lhasa. Consequently, I learned by myself and together with these artists. In 1980, I applied for art school in Beijing, passed the exam, and got admitted to the school. The training I chose to Beijing was Chinese brush painting; meaning I was only going to be taught my major in conjunction with the history of Chinese art. Surprisingly, in the early 1980s, Chinese history did not include anything about Tibetan art, or art from any other minority in the

Born in Lhasa in 1961, during the decade after the Chinese first entered Tibet, Gonkar Gyatso has had a fascinating artistic journey. From Lhasa to Beijing to Dharamsala to London, and finally to New York, Gonkar Gyatso has been one of the revelations of this year’s Venice Biennale. After experimenting with various media and getting reacquainted with his past, he has developed an artistic form that would allow him to remain close to his heritage, but without being enfolded in the traditions of Tibetan painting. Creating drawings with different layers of understanding, he combines the traditional style of the Buddha with the appealing and glossy imagery of popular stickers, and includes Chinese and Tibetan characters taken from press articles or writings from Mao Zedong.

In the interview below, Gonkar Gyatso shares the milestones in his journey that led him from Lhasa to New York.
Mainland. It was all about traditional Chinese art. After four years, and having acquired a good knowledge of Chinese art, I began to learn about Western contemporary art. That made me suddenly realize that I didn’t know anything about my own culture. I saw all these things in a new light. I was ready to learn about Tibet and its art.

**AAN:** What did you see in India that you didn’t see in Beijing or Tibet?

**GG:** In India, I decided to study traditional Bhutanese painting. There’s a lot of similarity between traditional Bhutanese painting and traditional Chinese paintings. Both use lines, both use a lot of color, both use a lot of composition. There are some similarities, but there are also differences.

When I arrived in India, I knew nothing about bhutanese art. I had never been taught in middle or primary school. I had never even thought of learning about Tibetan culture. Consequently, there were a lot of questions that had built up over the years. In those days, I began to try to provide an environment in which to learn about Tibetan culture. Bhutan was a place where I could see these questions.

**AAN:** What did you see in India that you didn’t see in Tibet or Beijing?

**GG:** In India, I saw a lot of paintings and rhymes that I had never seen before. I saw a lot of traditional Bhutanese paintings. In Tibet, I saw a lot of traditional paintings, but I didn’t see the same variety. In India, I saw a lot of traditional paintings that I had never seen before.

**AAN:** You pointed out religion is a very important aspect of Tibetan traditional art. Is religion an important component of your work?

**GG:** Religion is an important component of my work. I am interested in Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

**AAN:** You mentioned that you have a lot of work in India. How did you get to India?

**GG:** I went to India after my visit to Tibet. I was looking for a place where I could work on my paintings. I had completed a lot of work in Tibet, but I wanted to continue my work. In India, I saw a lot of traditional paintings that I had never seen before. I saw a lot of traditional paintings that I had never seen before.