



# Preserving Tibetan Art Beyond the Land of Snows

by Kalsang and Kim Yeshi

Under circumstances of extreme duress, artistic culture suffers greatly as survival becomes people's most pressing priority. The disruptive events of the 20th century in Tibet destroyed much of the nation's cultural wealth accumulated over 12 centuries. More than the physical expressions of this great civilization were destroyed, for the upheavals that shook Tibet from 1949 to 1978 also eliminated many of the heirs and practitioners of the great artistic traditions, as well as their supporting institutions.

Monasteries had long supported the arts in Tibet. Additionally, since the 18th century the traditions of *thangka* (religious scroll paintings), appliqué *thangka*, statue making, and woodcarving were organized into guilds, whose members were highly respected within Tibetan society. After the guilds were forced to disband in 1959, little could be done within Tibet to ensure the future of the traditions they had represented.

In the refugee communities Tibetans first faced an urgent struggle for survival. After safety and a modest degree of stability were achieved, efforts were initiated within the Tibetan community to ensure the preservation of their artistic culture. Training highly skilled artists proved to be unfeasible because Tibetans at that time did not have the means to commission work from them. Many of the refugees accepted the artwork they could afford, despite its lower quality, and gradually the public's appreciation of fine work declined. Artistic creations that would normally have taken months to complete were replaced with more per-

functory versions, using cheaper, ready-made materials. For the first 20 years after fleeing Tibet, refugee artists were likely to give up their trade for more lucrative occupations or to work on their own for very little. The students they trained lacked the vision or courage to set themselves up on their own once they had completed their instruction, and often resorted to working in restaurants or peddling sweaters on the streets of Madras, Delhi, or Bombay. And the few artists who resettled in the West had little opportunity to develop their skills.

By the late 1980s, when conditions for Tibetan refugees had become more stable, new efforts were undertaken to provide support for artists. Experience had shown that mere training was not sufficient; artists required a healthy context in which to work, proper remuneration had to be given, and the craft masters had to command public respect.

Since 1988, the Norbulingka Institute in Dharamsala has sought to reverse the early downward trend, recognizing the dangers that the decrease in quality posed for cultural survival. The institute began as a center to train artists in statue making, *thangka* painting and appliqué, and woodcarving. The institute building itself was intended to inspire the artists who worked and trained within it. It combines modern and traditional Tibetan architecture with a design based on the iconographic outline of Avalokiteshvara (Chenrezig in Tibetan) — the Buddha of compassion, the patron deity of Tibet — and has pools,







lush gardens, and a breathtaking view of the Dhauladhar mountain range of the Western Himalayas.

The system of training at Norbulingka is based on that which prevailed in pre-1959 Tibet. Apprentices work under the guidance of their senior and junior masters in six- to twelve-year training courses. The apprentices receive food, lodging, and a basic stipend which increases in proportion to their participation in the work undertaken by the master and his senior apprentices. By the time trainees complete the course, they have the option of leaving and establishing themselves, working for other patrons, or simply rising to the rank of “worker” or “junior master” and continuing to serve at Norbulingka itself. The intention has been to set up a supportive, free environment so that artists may concentrate on their work and take

whatever time is required to produce the exquisite religious statues, *thangkas*, carved furniture, and so on that have so distinguished Tibet’s unique artistic tradition in the past.

In order for an artistic tradition to survive, it must be viable and self-sufficient. It must be appreciated and supported by people belonging to the culture in which it originated. These are the tasks that the Norbulingka Institute has set for itself. The first step was to obtain funds to build adequate workshops for the artists. The next was to ensure that the masters felt comfortable teaching their apprentices the way they had been trained themselves, specifically that they did not feel under any pressure to take shortcuts. The third and most challenging task was to accustom the local public — Indians, Tibetans, and tourists alike — to fine quality and to raise their standards

of appreciation. The masters set the cost of their products based on the use of the best materials, and resulting orders showed that there was indeed an audience for quality products. Norbulingka is confident that the Tibetan public have not forgotten the meaning of quality and that they sufficiently appreciate their past to support the efforts of their artists. Presently, three-quarters of



Kalsang Ladoe measures the height of an unfinished Buddha statue in Dharamsala, India.

Photo © Sonam Zoksang





all orders at Norbulingka originate from the Tibetan community. Revenue generated from this work allows the institute to pay adequate salaries and offer a range of benefits sufficiently attractive that most Norbulingka trainees wish to remain to complete their apprenticeship.

## TRAINING AT NORBULINGKA STATUE MAKING

It takes 12 years to train a statue maker. The master seeks young, bright apprentices ideally no more than 13 or 14 years old. They are first taught to draw and then begin to interpret their drawings in copper, hammered into wax. Only when they have mastered this technique will they move on to participate in the work of the studio. In their eighth or ninth year, they begin to make statues of deities, after they have studied all the proportional iconographic grids particular to each one. These works, made from copper plates that are later gilded and assembled, can measure up to 20 ft. and involve a team of artists working together. Though a fully trained artist may be able to complete the work on a small metal-cast statue by himself, only a team can tackle the unique requirements of larger works. At present, the Norbulingka studio, working under the highly qualified master and Festival participant, Pemba Dorjee, is the only team doing such work.

## THANGKA PAINTING

*Thangka* painters train for six years. Depending on their ability they will begin to participate in the work of the studio within two to three years after having studied the proportional grids of all the classes of deities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. The Norbulingka studio receives numerous orders which are executed by the masters and the more advanced apprentices. Apprentices may work on sections of *thangkas* corresponding to their ability. Some *thangkas* are commissioned and have to be created from scratch; the master has to do the preparatory research specific to the subject portrayed in the *thangka* by consulting ancient religious texts and the masters of the particular spiritual lineage. Thus, as was done in European Renaissance studios, a number of painters may contribute to a *thangka* working at different levels, with the master supervising the project and contributing the final touches.

On completing a six-year apprenticeship, the newly qualified painter may be able to paint a *thangka* from start to finish, but he may still not be able to accomplish the research required for special commissions. This is a skill acquired with further experience. So far, most of the Norbulingka graduates have opted to remain in the studio taking on increasingly challenging tasks and training new students themselves.



Left: Choe Puntsok, the senior instructor at Norbulingka Institute, who is participating in the Folklife Festival, demonstrates techniques of woodcarving.

Photo by Jamphel Lhundup

Opposite page: A young Tibetan trains in drawing the strict iconographic forms of the Buddhist deities of traditional *thangka* paintings. Photo by Jamphel Lhundup





## WOODCARVING

A woodcarver's training also takes six years and like the painters' and statue-makers' course begins with drawing. The next task is to create a set of tools and to begin to carve. Talented trainees may be able to participate in the work of the studio within two years, but until they reach that stage, they practice on their own pieces, to be sold by the institute as "trainees' work." In the process, they learn the rules of Tibetan furniture making and the skills to produce altars, tables, thrones, headboards, and chests.



Through well-trained artists whose work is made available to a wider public outside India, Tibetan art should not only survive within its own community, but also gain recognition as a living practice that can take its place among the world's great artistic traditions. It is to be hoped that the Norbulingka Institute and similar organizations such as the Shechen Institute of Traditional Tibetan Arts in Nepal will produce enough highly qualified artists so that Tibetan works of art will not only become more readily available but also regain their position as a source of pride and opportunity among the Tibetan community.

## Suggested Reading

- Beer, Robert. 1999. *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. New York: Shambhala.
- Jackson, David & Janice. 1988. *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*. New York: Snow Lion.
- Norbulingka Institute <<http://www.norbulingka.com>>.
- Shechen Monastery <<http://shechen.12pt.com/finley03.html>>.

*Kalsang Yeshe was born in Lhasa, Tibet, in 1941 and joined Drepung Monastery when he was 15 years old. He left Tibet with the 100,000 Tibetan refugees who followed the Dalai Lama into exile. Kalsang received an acharya degree (M.A. equivalent) in 1972 and traveled to the United States to teach at the Universities of Pennsylvania and Virginia for five years. In 1979, he married, returned to India to serve as a minister and cabinet member in the Tibetan government-in-exile, and initiated what is now the Norbulingka Institute. He is currently Director of Norbulingka.*

*Kim Yeshe was raised and educated in France. She studied anthropology at Vassar College and received an M.A. in Buddhist studies from the University of Virginia. Kim married Kalsang Yeshe in 1979. She began the Losel Doll project in 1983 to raise funds for Drepung Monastery, relocated in South India. Through the Losel dolls, more than 175 traditional Tibetan costumes were researched and documented. In 1988, she helped establish Norbulingka Institute and in 1995 became Managing Director.*