

Painting Styles in the Rubin Collection: Identifications and Clarifications

by David Jackson

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Although the chronology of the founders of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhist painting is now established beyond dispute¹ and a few examples of most schools can now be identified,² the stylistic classification of actual paintings continues to vex historians of Tibetan art. This conundrum was once worse, so we can be grateful for whatever progress has been made.³ Part of the problem may derive from the oversimplified classification scheme we have inherited from the Tibetan authorities, according to which there are only three main later schools: 1. sMan-riś, 2. mKhyen-riś, and 3. sGar-bris, the second of which is rare. Traditional authorities do subdivide the two most important schools, distinguishing an old from new sMan-riś, treating the New sMan-riś of Chos-dbyings-rgya-mtsho almost as a separate school. In the same way, they sometimes differentiate between old and new sGar-bris, the "new" referring to styles Si-tu Pan-chen patronized in eighteenth-century Khams. Yet even with such additional refinements, one suspects that the styles were more numerous and their relations more complex.

One of the bravest recent attempts to apply the traditional styles is Rhie and Thurman's catalogue of the Rubin collection, a book to which my sole contribution was an independent chapter.⁴ Here I will try to clarify a few points in that catalogue, while proposing some further stylistic identifications. I offer these remarks as a recent footnote to the study of Tibetan painting styles that E. Gene Smith pioneered thirty years ago through his introduction to Kong-sprul's encyclopedia.⁵

The Main Tibetan Styles

The "Tibetan styles" (bod bris) that took hold after the sMan-thang-pa revolution in the mid-fifteenth century can be classified:

1. sMan-riś
 - a. Old sMan-riś
 - i. Modern Successors to the Old sMan-riś in dBus: The E-bris and "Gelukpa International School"
 - ii. Successors to the old sMan-riś in western gTsang (Shel-dkar, etc.)⁶
 - b. New sMan-riś
 - i. New sMan-riś of Tashilhunpo, forerunner to the gTsang-riś
 - ii. New sMan-riś in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Khams: A Hybrid sMan-riś/sGar-bris
2. mKhyen-riś
 - a. Early mKhyen-riś of mKhyen-brtse and Disciples
 - b. The Revival of the mKhyen-riś by the Fifth Dalai Lama
 - c. A mKhyen-riś Branch Surviving at 'Bri-gung
3. sGar-bris
 - a. Early sGar-bris
 - b. Later sGar-bris, Si-tu's Influence
4. Regional Styles
 - a. dBus-riś (i.e., E-riś, 1.a.i. above)
 - b. gTsang-riś (1.b.i. above)
 - c. Khams-riś (mainly 3.b. and 1.b.ii above)
 - d. Amdo bris (regional variant of 1.a.i?)
 - e. Ching Dynasty Court Art (China)

Early Indian-Influenced Styles



Ru 319

These categories leave out the previous, "pre-Tibetan" painting styles, most of which could be classified under the traditional categories of either "East-[Indian] painting" (shar bris) or "Newar painting" (bal bris). An example of Tibetan "East-[Indian] painting" would be the sTag-lung paintings, such as catalogue no. 102 (Ru 319). It is wrong (cf. p. 315), to assert that sTag-lung painted lineages usually include Atisha, for often they do not (Rhie and Thurman 1996, no. 203, is not typical of the corpus). In addition, if the main Phyag-chen lineage is shown (as is usual), there is no need to qualify the presence of Phag-mo-gru-pa with a "perhaps." Phag-mo-gru-pa was sTag-lung-thang-pa's main master and was crucial to his tradition.

For later Tibetans, "Newar painting" (bal bris) included not only paintings by Newar artists or their early Tibetan imitators, but also old-fashioned Tibetan styles that resisted the inflow of Chinese art and aesthetic taste even as late as the sixteenth century. One assumes the portrait of Virupa, no. 83 (Ru 641), p. 280, is an example of true fourteenth-century Bal-bris, but the identification of the lay master above as bSod-nams-rtse-mo is doubtful. He is more likely either Sa-skya Pandita's guru rJe-btsun Grags-pa-rgyal-mtshan or his grandfather, Sa-chen.



Ru 641

Regarding the later period of true Newar-style (Bal-bris) painting, Rhie mentions, p. 55, "Jangpukpa Kunga Lekpa" (Byang-phug-pa Kun-dga'-legs-pa) as a guru of Tsongkhapa. (His name was omitted from the index.) In fact, he was a master who flourished in gTsang in the first half of the fifteenth century. The Bal-bris paintings he commissioned thus probably did not belong to the fourteenth century.

Figure 13 cited by Rhie on p. 54 (from Liu I-se 1957, fig. 18) is unlikely to have been Sa-skya Pandita. This iconography with such hand gestures and hand-held objects is not otherwise attested for Sa-pan. One also wonders whether the attribution (Rhie 1999, p. 55; Liu 1957, figs. 22 and 24) of 'Bri-gung thangkas to the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century is not too early.



Ru 269

With the portraits "Sakya Lama," no. 86 [=Ngor abbot Sangs-rgyas-seng-ge 1504-1569, 11th abbot], and "Master Buddhashri," no. 87 (Ru 269), p. 291f., we come to later Tibetan continuations of the Bal-bris. Buddhashri is an important Tibetan master who transmitted the Lam 'bras to Ngor-chen Kun-dga'-bzang-po (1382-1456) in the early fifteenth century. The Lha-mchog-seng-ge of the inscription is the ninth Ngor abbot rGyal-ba Lha-mchog-seng-ge (1468-1535, abbatial tenure 1516-1534) with this distinctive name who commissioned the work.⁷

The main figure Buddhashri appears probably in his role as lineage master of the Sa-skya-pa (Ngor-pa) Lam 'bras instructions. (He is shown wearing special Tibetan monastic garb, so any speculation about his being an Indian pundit is iconographically impossible). Compare his appearance in the Lam 'bras lineages in no. 189 (Ru 352) p. 468f. The Indian pandita named Buddhashri referred to by Rhie and Thurman (p. 291) played no known role in any later Tibetan school.⁸



Ru 352



The portrayal of three "Sakya lamas," no. 90 (Ru 63), p. 296, is also stylistically conservative for the sixteenth century. Here the main figure at top center identified as Se-ston Kun-rig (a lay master) can only be his ordained disciple Zhang-ston Chos-'bar, who preceded Sa-chen in this Lam 'bras lineage. It is anachronistic to call the first two masters "Sakya" lamas, though their lineages, it is true, were later mainly transmitted by Sa-chen and his successors.

The portrayal of Great Adept Avadhutipa, no. 44 (Ru 41), p.

Ru 63 219f., illustrates the penetration of Chinese styles by the seventeenth or eighteenth century in paintings of the Sa-skya-pa school. Avadhutipa appears here as a lineage master of the Lam 'bras instructions.

"Ganden Renaissance" or "Ming-Court-Inspired Revolution"?

Bob Thurman in his introductory essay (p. 31ff.) hypothesizes the existence of a "Ganden Renaissance" mass movement in Tibetan religious culture from ca. 1400 to the 1640s.⁹ Such a "Ganden Renaissance" is, to my knowledge, nowhere attested in the corpus of accessible Tibetan historical writings. Even if Western historians or Tibetologists might have overlooked it, how could something of such scope and significance have escaped the notice of the historically well-informed scholars from Tibet?



Ru 41

Thurman's art-historian co-author, M. Rhie, did not adopt the "Ganden renaissance" as a period or descriptive category in her own essays or descriptions, perhaps because it is not a coherent period or development. The period in question overlaps two major art-historical epochs, starting (ca. 1400) in the pre-sMan-thang-pa, heavily Indian-influenced, styles (Bal-ris). It includes the transitional styles of the Gyantse stupa (1430s-1440s), undergoes the sMan-thang-pa revolution (from the 1450s or 1460s), and ends in a Sinicized style of the later sMan-ris (mid to late seventeenth century).

Thurman's thesis is that Tsong-kha-pa's visions of Ganden (Tushita) heaven in ca. 1400 triggered a massive religious and artistic renaissance in Tibet during the two and a half centuries that followed. He proposes that a "mass movement" took place that also embraced the other main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, thus denying that he is describing essentially just the Gelukpa school's foundation and its eventual winning of political supremacy through a military imposition of a theocracy in the 1640s. One wonders what role the banning of the Gelukpa monks from the Lhasa prayer festival for the first two decades of the sixteenth century or the driving of the Sera and Drepung monks from their monasteries in 1618 would have played in this "mass movement," which ended only in the 1640s when the strongest rival schools were forcibly suppressed--through many confiscations and forced conversions of monasteries--and the main political rivals were eliminated through Mongol-led wars.

Thurman reconstructs in a visionary or intuitive way, without citing historical or art-historical evidence. His sole Tibetan source is one later hagiography of Tsong-kha-pa cited as "rGyal-dbang Chos-rje" in the bibliography. Thurman proposes a visionary mechanism for artistic developments (p. 36): "... their enlightenments naturally became the basis for a widespread artistic renaissance, as artists of liberated creativity were moved to articulate their visions to a wider world." This is internally consistent with one of the key identifying characteristics he ascribes to the art: "presence of visionary clarity."

The renaissance in the West gave rise to neoclassical styles of art and architecture through the rediscovery of the classical (Greek and Roman) models. For a renaissance analogy to hold in Tibet, one would expect a kind of Indian Buddhist neoclassicism in Tibetan art of the fifteenth century. Thurman knows this and proposes (p. 36): "In the Tibetan case, the new ideas were the rediscovery ... of the old Indian ideals of Buddhist humanism." In fact, Tibetan aesthetic taste did not experience neoclassicism. It did just the opposite, veering away from the old Indian decorative elements and adopting Chinese art for the depiction of everything except the divine figures themselves. This radical change was the stylistic "revolution" (not revival) led by the Tibetan painters sMan-thang-pa and mKhyen-brtse.

The ultimate impulse for sMan-thang-pa's stylistic change in ca. 1450 is not to be sought in the insights or activities of any Tibetan religious master of ca. 1400, but in the generosity and taste of the Ming imperial court in the next decade. The Ming Yongle emperor (reigned 1403-1424), by commissioning exquisite Buddhist artworks and offering them to the leading lamas of Tibet (including one of Tsong-kha-pa's top disciples) whom he invited to his court, sowed the seeds for the coming revolution in Tibetan religious aesthetic taste.¹⁰ For it was Ming Buddhist masterpiece paintings that sMan-bla-don-grub and mKhyen-brtse took, about four decades later, as their main sources of inspiration.

Delayed Penetration of Chinese Styles

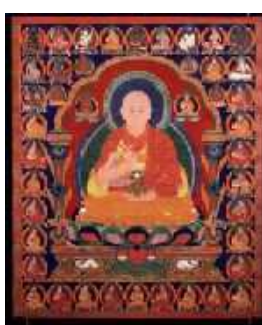
The penetration of Chinese landscapes into the backgrounds of paintings that began in the mid-fifteenth century (under the delayed inspiration of Ming-court Chinese Buddhist art) took a long time to replace the older styles completely in central Tibet. They were adopted at first through the spread of various more or less Tibetanized versions of the sMan-ris, and to a lesser degree, through the mKhyen-ris. Then, from the mid-sixteenth century on, other Chinese models penetrated via the sGar-bris.

Chinese landscapes were not assimilated everywhere at the same speed. Rhie correctly notes that they "reached universal acceptance as settings for deities only from the seventeenth century." Even in the seventeenth century, some connoisseurs such as the Fifth Dalai Lama commissioned "copies" of old art, thus producing paintings without such backgrounds.

One interesting phenomenon documented by the Rubin collection is the conservative resistance that continued well into the sixteenth century, both in Sa-skya-pa art (where one would have expected it, for example at Ngor) and in paintings of the Karma bKa'-bryud-pa. I refer to six such paintings:



Ru 457



Ru 493



Ru 162



Ru 562



Ru 561



Ru 536

No. 85 (Ru 457), "first half of the 16th century"

No. 86 (Ru 493), "mid 16th century"

No. 89 (Ru 162), "ca. 1500"

Nos. 103-105 (Ru 562, 561 and 536), "mid 16th century"



Ru 560

Concerning painting no. 103 (Ru 562), p. 317f., the gSang-'dus Rim-Inga lineage is not the lineage of the whole set, which portrays as main figures of each thangka two lineage lamas of the Phyag-chen (Zung 'jug). The gSang-'dus Rim-Inga is the minor lineage portrayed in only one thangka (Ru 560).

When assessing the penetration of Chinese styles (Rhie 1999, p. 56ff.), the Sixteen Arhats (or Sixteen Elders, gnas brtan bcu drug) should be treated as a special subject. Since this cycle originated from China, by definition it entailed more Chinese influence. One can get a more accurate idea of the extent to which Chinese styles have penetrated a given Tibetan school

by looking at the backgrounds of iconographic subjects that had no special link with China.

"Shakyamuni Buddha with Life-scenes" (catalogue no. 13, Ru 264, p. 159f.), is another such iconographic subject that originated from China: a depiction of a Chinese "Hundred Deeds of the Buddha" (rgya mdzad).¹¹ This iconographic cycle, too, should eventually be gathered and investigated as a group. Rhie's description of no. 13 mentions virtually all styles, even the Tenth Karma-pa; however, the painting seems to be by a sMan-ris artist.



Ru 264

1. sMan-ris

1.a.i. Modern Successors to the Old sMan-ris in dBus Province: The So-called "Gelukpa International School" and the E-ris

In the thangka of "Guru Drakpochey and the Between-State Deities," no. 179 (557), p. 445f., the clouds are exactly those of a typical sMan-ris of dBus province, central Tibet, of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Note the repeated shape of the clouds and their unshaded outer edges. There is no reason to attribute this painting to Eastern Tibet.



90130 (Ru 123)

By contrast, "Vaishravana and the Eight Troll Generals," no. 58 (Ru 123 is now 90130), p. 238f., is by no means a typical Lhasa sMan-ris of ca. 1900, which abhorred solid dark-blue skies and would never outline clouds with indigo. There is little to support the hypothesis (p. 238), "possibly by an artist working in Lhasa who combined elements of the traditional New Menri and Karma Gardri styles."

The sMan-ris commonly practiced by artists of dBus province was not necessarily the high art of the Dalai Lama's court artists, though the traditions may have overlapped at times. The painting of Shakyamuni with Avadana legends, no. 14 (Ru 494), p. 159ff., is attributed to the refined New sMan-ris style of the Lhasa workshops ca. 1900. This depiction of certain episodes from Kshemendra's work is based on sNar-thang blocks, and at first glance it would seem to be a fine gTsang-bris--note the very dark sky above and the shading of clouds. It may be possible in due course to differentiate this possibly "Tashilhunpo court art, ca. 1900 [?]" from "Lhasa court art, ca. 1900," or to verify Rhie's Lhasa supposition. I admit that the style of no. 14 is similar to Jackson 1996, pl. 67, identified by me as in a high court style of nineteenth-century Lhasa.¹²



Ru 494



Ru 380

In "the Fourth Dalai Lama and some previous incarnations," no. 128 (Ru 380), p. 357f., the main figure is one of the Dalai Lamas, whose glorious spiritual pedigree the thangka portrays. The painting itself probably dates to the mid- or late-seventeenth century and not the eighteenth or nineteenth century. This treatment of clouds as dominating landscape elements is unusual but not impossible for the late seventeenth century. Such a trulku-lineage portrait can hardly be much later than the last historical figure portrayed. Could the vase in the central figure's left hand symbolize a prayer for his long life, as it so clearly does for the facing portrait of the Fifth Dalai Lama (cat. no. 129, Ru 506)? It is understandable that Rhie and Thurman had trouble identifying the main figure. From an iconographical and structural standpoint, one would expect the first four Dalai Lamas below, but instead one finds:

22? Central Figure



Ru 506

21?

18

19

20

Inscriptions:

18. Chos rgyal 'phags pa

19. dGe 'dun grub pa [the First Dalai Lama]

20. bSod nams rgya [mtsho] [the Third Dalai Lama]

21? Ngag dbang blo? rgya mtsho

22? Main figure [no inscription]

The inscription beneath figure no. 21 is the Fifth Dalai Lama's name. Note his typical portrait with small mustache (cf. cat. no. 129). So who could the main figure be? The second, fourth or even sixth Dalai Lama? Comparison with other portraits might help solve this puzzle.

The E-ris as an Important Old sMan-ris Successor in dBus

E. Gene Smith 1970, p. 46, asserted that the New sMan-ris of Chos-dbyings-rgya-mtsho was the main origin of the later twentieth-century Lhasa or central-Tibetan mode (after blending with "Khyenri, Gadri and later Indian influences"). A similar opinion repeated several times by Rhie is that Chos-dbyings-rgya-mtsho's New sMan-ris later developed into the (Central-Tibetan) sMan-ris "international style." I have found no written source or other authority for either assertion. M. Rhie (1999, p. 68) suggests in the same vein that the New sMan-ris of the Potala murals became a national style for Gelukpa monasteries throughout Tibet, and an international style, spreading also to Gelukpa establishments of Mongolia and China. She describes this as "a handsome and complex style, which can overpower the viewer with its mass of detail."¹³

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1. See Jackson 1997. [\[back\]](#)
 2. See Jackson 1996. [\[back\]](#)
 3. See R. A. Stein 1987, p. 200, who concluded: "D'autres écoles sont encore mentionnées, mais jusqu'ici on n'a guère trouvé de peintures qu'on pourrait attribuer à telle ou telle d'entre elles." See also J. C. Huntington 1990, p. 229: "No documentary or other direct evidence illustrates the features that can identify paintings of either the sMan bris or mkhyen ris schools." See further P. Pal in Singer and Denwood eds. 1997, p. 11: "In the context of Tibetan art, we can hardly give emphasis to the work of an individual artist, for so much of the art is anonymous. ...It is difficult to assemble a corpus that might define an individual artist's style." [\[back\]](#)
 4. Jackson 1999. [\[back\]](#)
 5. E. Gene Smith 1970. [\[back\]](#)
 6. See D. Jackson 1996, pp. 358 and 361, notes 827 and 828, on the lineage of Wangdrak's father and grandfather. [\[back\]](#)
 7. I refer again to the list of Ngor abbots in Jackson 1993, p. 127, my review of Rhie and Thurman 1991. [\[back\]](#)
 8. I briefly alluded to this point in Jackson 1993, p. 120. [\[back\]](#)
 9. Thurman presented the same thesis orally at the Tibetan studies conference at Bloomington in 1996. [\[back\]](#)
 10. On the invitation of Tsong-kha-pa, see E. Sperling (1982), "The 1413 Embassy to Tsong-kha-pa and the Arrival of Byams-chen Chos-rje Shakya ye-shes at the Ming Court," *Journal of the Tibet Society*, vol. 2, pp. 105-107. [\[back\]](#)
 11. On the Chinese "Hundred Deeds," see Jackson 1996, p. 133, n. 249. [\[back\]](#)
 12. Compare Jackson 1996, pl. 67, with Essen and Thingo 1989, 1-12, which also has a fairly light horizon in the landscape. [\[back\]](#)
 13. Cf. Rhie 1991, p.62. [\[back\]](#)

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