

Dating Tibetan Art

Essays on the Possibilities and Impossibilities of Chronology from the Lempertz Symposium, Cologne

Bearbeitet von
Ingrid Kreide-Damani, Roger Goepper, Heather Stoddard

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INTRODUCTION

During the past twelve years, international trade in Tibetan art has enjoyed an unprecedented upswing, as buyer demand has confronted limited supply. Prices have risen to dizzying heights, in line with the maxim: “The older the piece, the higher the price.”

In order to analyse whether such a development in prices was academically justified and to establish more transparency, Lempertz Auction House of Cologne, Germany, invited nine leading European scholars to present papers on research methods and problems relating to the dating of Tibetan art. The meeting, held amid a circle of collectors and connoisseurs, took place on November 17 and 18, 2001, at the Cologne Museum for East Asian Art and at Lempertz Auction House. During these two days, the Lempertz symposium in Cologne became a lively forum for discussion. The speakers as well as the audience seized the opportunity to expand their horizons and better understand each other’s positions. Sharing expertise and experiences, they scrutinized the problem of dating art from new perspectives.

In this publication we would like to present to the reader the revised papers of seven of the nine speakers at the Lempertz Symposium. Their diverging points of view as to the possibilities of dating Tibetan art are based on different scholarly approaches and reflect the freedom of academic research. The order of contributions follows that of the symposium, with the exception that David Jackson’s comments in response to Martin Brauen’s reconstruction of an unresolved court case have been moved up one slot to immediately after Brauen’s contribution. Brauen’s “detective story” touched off an animated discussion, and it was also a challenge to Jackson for testing his own method of dating Tibetan paintings, as described in Jackson’s supplemented paper.

To ignite discussion was indeed the intention of the symposium, not least with respect to Roger Goepper’s dating of the Sumtsek temple in Alchi. Goepper’s dating had been questioned by Fournier in 2001,¹ but during the symposium it was corroborated by new arguments both from Goepper himself and from Christian Luczanits.

Jane Casey Singer’s scholarly detective work documents just how difficult it is to establish the dating of a work of art with absolute certainty. Heather Stoddard presents historical and political facts that place stylistic developments within West-Tibetan art in a new, hitherto unconsidered light. By contrast, the practicing Buddhist and reincarnate high lama Loden Sherap Daggyab Rinpoche overturns the aesthetic perceptions and

1 “An Interview with Lionel Fournier,” in *Orientations*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 2001, pp. 68–75.

material valuations of Tibetan art in the Western world. Daggyab Rinpoche subjects the supposedly universal validity of a Western understanding of art to critical examination and confronts the Western view with a different interpretation of reality. Not least in order to qualify or “relativize” the other vehement discussions conducted almost exclusively from Western perspectives, his contribution has been placed at the beginning of this volume.

Michael Henss regretted being unable to include his contribution on style copies in Tibetan bronze artwork in the present volume. Ursula Toyka-Fuong, who personally guided the symposium participants through the normally inaccessible Schulemann Collection in the archives of the Museum for East Asian Art, has already published elsewhere a comprehensive publication on that collection.²

The authors’ different systems of transcribing Tibetan have mostly been preserved in this book, in conformity with the diverse scholarly approaches and questions posed by this group of researchers on Tibetan art.

The Role of the Art Trade

When approaching Tibetan art, the art trade gains valuable orientation from the expertise and information made available by scholarship on art. Because of the large amount of time that research requires, people in the art trade normally cannot involve themselves intensively in research. The art trade may, however, be in a position to make contributions from its experience, pass on information and encourage discussions, but its primary interests remain commercial. Yet even from a trade perspective, divergent scholarly points of view on the dating of Tibetan art should not be excluded without careful consideration. The reader is invited to form his or her own judgement.

A Few Words of Thanks

The editor wishes to thank the contributors to the Cologne Lempertz symposium and the authors of this volume. Without the support of Lempertz Auction House, Cologne, this book would not have been able to appear. The publication owes its present form to David Jackson as editor of the series *Contributions to Tibetan Studies*, whom the editor of this volume would also like to thank again for his constructive criticisms and improvements. Special thanks to Prof. Hendrik Hanstein and the colleagues of Lempertz Auction House, particularly of the East Asian Department, for their support in organizing and conducting the symposium, and to Angelika Borchert for her energetic

2 SAGASTER, KLAUS, and TOYKA-FUONG, URSULA (eds.) 1984, *Ikonographie und Symbolik des tibetischen Buddhismus. Die Kulptastiken der Sammlung Werner Schulemann im Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst*, Cologne, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

commitment. For her kind support of the Lempertz symposium and for her presentation of the Schulemann Collection, normally off limits at the museum's archives, thanks are due to Dr. Adele Schlombs, Director of the Museum for East Asian Art in Cologne. Last but not least, I would like to thank Edith C. Watts for her translations of the German contributions.

