

TAMANG ART
A PARALLEL STYLE IN THE TANTRIC BUDDHIST
ART OF NEPAL

M.A. Lichtenberg-Van Mierlo,
Antwerp

Introduction

While trekking and residing in the northern and central mountain areas of Nepal and visiting the temples and house shrines of the local Buddhists I came to distinguish and appreciate old statues known as 'Tamang'. In the vast field of publications on Buddhist art in general and on the art of Nepal in particular, these 'Tamang' statues are only casually mentioned if not overlooked. This art style has not attracted much attention because of the overwhelming and overshadowing consideration shown to the more hieratic and sophisticated creations of both Nepal and Tibet. Another reason for being neglected by historians of art is that the production of 'Tamang' bronzes was considerably less than the production of Nepalese and Tibetan bronzes. The bronzes under discussion in this article all belong to the cult of Tantric Buddhism.

Collectors and scholars have approached and evaluated eastern art almost exclusively by western standards. So far it has been a rule of historians of art when they discuss eastern art to focus only on the main style of a period and area, to trace its origin and influence and to consider other trends as an imitative substyle or as being folk art. With the

differentiation of the 'Tamang' bronzes from the gross of Nepalese sculpture which developed out of the Gupta and Pala-Sena traditions we witness the simultaneous existence of two different art idioms.

Individualism and the search for a new art idiom is totally absent in eastern art. In essence eastern art is transcendental, it aims at expressing the various moments of man's experience of the sacred. The eastern artist adheres strictly to a fixed iconographic code, he mainly imitates a model. He will have succeeded and will be considered successful only if he has been able to recreate and endow the icon with mystical qualities. Tantric Buddhist art especially serves mystical-magical purposes. Aesthetics is subservient to it. When confronted with eastern art one should invariably look for its mystical-magical qualities. The art products and ritual implements of Tantric Buddhism are supposed to be magnetized with subtle powers and to have a subconscious activating capacity.

As far as I know no attempt has been made to categorize and differentiate the style known as 'Tamang'. Its style characteristics show a marked difference from what is generally acknowledged as being typical for Nepalese and Tibetan metal sculpture. When occasionally a 'Tamang' statue is discussed, it has been classified as being Nepalese¹ without further differentiation or has been wrongly quoted as being Tibetan.² Stylistically the 'Tamang' bronzes differ considerably from other Nepalese productions, whether Buddhist or Hindu. Considering their specific art idiom and particular atmosphere they deserve to be regarded as a distinctive style. This is the purpose of this article.

1. D.I. Lauf, *Das Erbe Tibets*, Plate 74; P.H. Pott, *Burma, Korea, Tibet*, Plate P. 200.

2. *Tibetica* 37, Schoettle *Ostasiatica* Stuttgart, Statue 2680.

Origin

The appellation 'Tamang' is a popular appellation. It is partly incorrect, because this type of statue was mainly made in patan in the Kathmandu Valley by members of the Sakya caste. In general they were commissioned and bought by Tamangs,¹ during pilgrimage to the sacred places of the Valley and therefore came to be known as 'Tamang', although other Buddhist tribes such as Sherpas, Gurungs, and pilgrims from as far as Dolpo and Tibet too purchased these bronzes. A Tamang layman informant living in the Kathmandu Valley asserted that not all the 'Tamang' statues were made by members of the Sakya caste, but that some had been produced by Tamangs themselves. As Tamang paintings were created by Tamangs, so also bronzes were cast by them. He further informed me that Tamangs did carve wood sculpture.

The 'Tamang' bronzes show compositional and stylistic similarities to Buddhist metal sculptures found in Bihar and Bengal, datable from the eighth to the twelfth centuries A.D., which do not show any stylistic relationship with the Pala-Sena art of the same period. These Indian bronzes are the subject of a study by B.N. Mukherjee² who distinguishes them from the Pala-Sena bronzes. Correctly he calls these works a parallel style separate from the well-known Pala-Sena school. Mukherjee demonstrates that these bronzes are not imitations of Pala-Sena works and that the difference between the two groups of sculptors relates chiefly to their ideas of and approach to plastic art, particularly to the art of creating human figures. As it is accepted that the Kathmandu Valley metal sculptors are the

1. According to an informant, a Tamang lama, the Tamang people came to Nepal with the Tibetan conqueror, King Song-tsen-gam-po in the seventh century. They were part of the cavalry or as others say, they were horse traders. The king ordered them to settle in the border areas, to protect Tibet and to cultivate the land. The Tamang all adhere to the Old Schools of Tantric Buddhism.

2. B.N. Mukherjee, *East Indian Art Styles* (Calcutta: K. Bagchi, 1980).

inheritors of the Pala-Sena artists, likewise it could be that the 'Tamang' style is a continuation of these eighth to twelfth century Bihar and Bengal regional styles. Whereas Pala art is traceable to Gupta art, these unsophisticated Bihar and Bengal bronzes are not, and may have their roots in a regional art idiom.

The 'Tamang' bronzes do not show any affinity either with Kashmir Buddhist bronzes or with North West Indian folk bronzes. This is not to say that they never exhibit any outside influence. Unquestionably some 'Tamang' bronzes do display features of Nepalo-Tibetan origins, as for example, the elongated eye. As these bronzes do not try to imitate a hieratic style we cannot call these icons a substyle. Nor can we categorize these products as folk art, as it shows that when worked at more precisely the artists were able to create bronzes of great artistic merit. The 'Tamang' bronzes should rather be viewed as a parallel style.

Description

The 'Tamang' bronzes are not heavily decorated. The majority of them are not gold plated. The ornamentation on garments is kept very sparse. The forms are generally sober, there is an economy of line. The torso is elongated. In general the volumes and curves of the body of Nepalese statues are more full and round than those of 'Tamang' bronzes. Compared to Nepalese bronzes they look dispassionate. Only the pattern of the aura shows a break with the tradition of sober ornamentation; it has movement and the forms are elaborate. On all the old bronzes I saw, the aura was made by following the repousse technique. Only later, especially in the nineteenth century, is the aura made by the lost wax technique and becomes stiff and flat. All the bronzes in this article except Plate 1 show

apertures at the back of the lotus for holding the aura. The double-petalled lotus in some bronzes, in contrast to the deity, is only superficially carved. The lotus looks 'shaven'. The most primitive looking statues have bulging eyes (pl. 1), while in other bronzes the contour of the eye is circular but with a short line inside to suggest the eyeball (pl. 2 -- pl. 14). In other statues the contour of the eyes is elongated and the line suggesting the eyeball is long.

The head-dress is extremely stylized. In contrast to Tibetan bronzes the head does not show any traces of paint. As a rule, except for Plate 10, the sculptor omits any suggestion of hair. At the back the head looks bald, except for the standing hair knot. Inside the bronzes the husk has been removed, because, as is the custom with Tantric Buddhist statues, they have to contain consecrated materials. Once the statue is filled with sacred materials it is sealed with a wooden plaquette. Some statues display a hole at the back of the head, also with the purpose of containing consecrated materials.

In their bronzes the Tamang have a preference for portraying the historical Buddha, Padmasambhava, Vajrasattva, Avalokitesvara and Tara, while in their paintings they depict wrathful deities. 'Tamang' bronzes display a stylization of devotional features. They possess a mystical intensity and are sometimes endowed with a fascinating numinosity.

Technique

The bronzes are made by the following two techniques: the repousse technique and the lost wax technique. Many statues show a combination of both techniques: the torso and arms are made by lost wax and the lotus by repousse. Some repousse parts are so solid and perfectly beaten and polished that they

give the impression of having been made by the lost wax technique. The various pieces are assembled and held together with the help of pins.

Exact dating is a difficult task. None of the bronzes published in this article has a dated inscription. Considering the patina and specific style characteristics, we may assume that all objects, except Plate 16, can be dated safely as being manufactured well before the nineteenth century.



Plate 1 Djangjima

Believed to be the mother of Padmasambhava. It is said that she came to Bodnath in the Kathmandu Valley where she vanquished demons. In this bronze she is depicted holding two demons in her arms. One demon she is killing; another is being trampled upon. The crown on her head is adorned with five turquoises. She stands on a mountain.

Lost wax Bronze. Height 12cm. Collection Lichtenberg.



Plate 2 Avalokitesvara

This is the main form of Avalokitesvara. One hand holds the crystal rosary, another hand a lotus, symbolizing respective compassion and purity.

Lost wax Bronze. Height 13.5cm.



Plate 3 Avalokitesvara

This statue is composed of three parts. Lotus and legs are made by the repousse technique, the upper body by lost wax. The different parts are held together with the help of pins. Height 23cm. Collection Vandeveld, Belgium.



Plate 4 Padmasambhava

In his right hand he holds the vajra in the mudra of teaching and in his left hand he holds a skullcup filled with the elixir of life. This statue is made entirely by following the repoussé technique.

Height 24.5cm. Private collection, Belgium.



Plate 5 Avalokitesvara

This statue is entirely gold-plated. The figure is lost wax, while the lotus and aura are repousse.

Height (with aura) 25cm.



Plate 6 Vajrasattva

Vajrasattva is the active form of the primordial Buddha. The vajra symbolizes yogic and spiritual action. The bell is the symbol of intuitive wisdom. All pieces except the upper body are made by repoussé. The body is gold-plated. Height (with aura) 59cm.



Plate 7 Avalokitesvara

Remark that the petals of the lotus are not elaborate.

Lost wax Bronze. Height 15cm.



Plate 8 Vajrasattva

Holding the vajra in his right hand and the bell in his left hand Vajrasattva, containing the five Buddha principles, is the active reflex of the primordial Buddha. Lost wax Bronze. Height 14cm. Collection Vande Veire.



Plate 9 White Tara

Tara is one of the most important deities in the Tantric Buddhist pantheon. The Lotus looks 'shaven'. At the back of the head is an aperture for containing consecrated materials. Entirely lost wax. Height 16.5cm.



Plate 10 The Historical Buddha Sakyamuni
His right hand is in the 'earth-witness' mudra. In his left
hand he holds a begging bowl. After his enlightenment Buddha
was pondering about the truth of his experiences. When he
was convinced of their reality he reached down and touched
the earth. Figure and lotus are lost wax; aura is repoussé.
Height (with aura) 19.5cm.



Plate 11 White Tara

It is said that she was born from a tear from Avalokitesvara.
She is the helping and guiding star. Lotus is 'shaven'.
Aura is repousse, figure is lost wax. Height (with aura)
23cm.



Plate 12 Avalokitesvara

Note the particular way of draping the ceremonial scarf, typical for 'Tamang' bronzes. See also Plate 3. Lotus is 'shaven', lost wax Bronze. Height 16cm.



Plate 13 Padmasambhava with his Two Consorts
Padmasambhava was an Indian magician who brought the Tantric
teachings to Tibet in the eighth century.
Lotus is repousse; the figures are lost wax. Height 12cm.



Plate 14
Padmasambhava with his two Consorts.
Lost wax Bronze. Height 15cm.



Plate 15 Stupa

Stupas are monuments symbolizing the totality of the teachings and achievements of Tantric Buddhism. The steps of the base represent: kindness, joy and equanimity. The steps leading towards and reaching just below the dome represent different spiritual stages. The dome symbolized awakening. The spire above the dome shows the different Tantric methods. On top of the spire is the lotus of the five wisdoms, on which is a sun resting on a crescent moon, symbolizing total integration. Wood Sculpture. Height 24cm.



Plate 16 White Tara

This Bronze is characterized by a single perforated lotus
Entirely lost wax. Height 15.5cm. 19th Century.