



TIBETAN OBJECTS IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: The Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures acquired two hundred items from Tibet in the 1950s: bronze sculptures, paintings and ritual implements. These items came from private collections confiscated after the Second World War according to the presidential decrees dealing with the post-war state reconstruction. Although the administration of the confiscated properties was meticulous, the transfer of items to the Náprstek Museum interrupted the history of ownership and meant the loss of the historical knowledge of its origin. As the result, the Tibet collection in the Náprstek Museum reveals more about the political and social history of post-war Czechoslovakia than about the perception of Tibetan culture in Czechoslovakia during the first half of the 20th century.

KEY WORDS: Tibet – history of museum collections – orientalism – Náprstek museum – post-war Czechoslovakia

Introduction: Collecting Tibet in the Náprstek Museum

Research on the history of museum collections is an important part of the study of appreciation of other cultures. Particularly the history of ownership can answer to questions about the perception of the “otherness”. The museum collections that we admire, exhibit and study today are results of the collecting and the appreciation of foreign cultures that took place at least several decades ago. Not only the owners’ personalities, education, financial and social standing, but also how the political situation of the period influenced the process of collecting, appreciation of collections, their exhibiting and scholarly research, and consequently, the ways how the collectors, as well as the general audience, saw other cultures, not to mention that the results of this approach have an impact on museum activities and exhibitions even today.

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The present study is dealing with the history of the Tibetan Buddhism Collection in the Náprstek Museum, precisely with the objects acquired in the first half of the 20th century. This acquisition covers only the minority of the artifacts from the whole collection; however, it includes visually appealing items of a high craftsmanship quality; such as bronze statues and large paintings that nowadays represent the highlights of the Náprstek Museum.

According to the period of the acquisition, the Tibetan Buddhism² Collection in the Náprstek Museum is divided into two parts. The majority of the objects came from Mongolia³ where they were collected by Czechoslovak COMECON experts during the 1960s and 1970s (Heroldová 2014). Their acquisition history is well documented, and the objects are accompanied by other visual and archival sources – photographs and movie recordings, drawings, newspapers clippings, diaries, as well as personal and business letters. Although the collectors amassed large collections they focused on small and easily portable objects. The collections mainly consists of small votive paintings, clay offering tablets, bronze statuettes of deities, and everyday objects such as knives, tobacco pouches, pipes, and dress adornments. As opposed to more than two thousand objects in the COMECON experts' collections, a much smaller number of items part was acquired during the first half of the 20th century until the 1950s. Especially, in the 1950s approximately two hundred pieces were transferred to the Náprstek Museum from private pre-war collections. Although the political and cultural context of the transfer is today clouded by a lack of sources, as it will be discussed later, its research provides, nevertheless, an insight into the less known and still little-studied period in the history of the Náprstek Museum Collections.

The Context: Perception of Tibet in Europe

Europeans had the opportunity to meet Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism through numerous travel books of missionaries, travelers and scientists during the last two centuries, although the first accounts appeared as early as the Middle Ages. This distant country stimulated imagination, and Tibet became a space where Westerners put their ideas, whether political, spiritual and aesthetic. Serious study of Tibetan language and history appeared simultaneously with colonial expanse. Tibetan Buddhism became both a source of spiritual salvation for Western practitioners as well as of strange and dangerous rituals; fiction and movies represented Tibet either as a lost paradise or a mysterious and enigmatic country.

² Mahāyāna Buddhism developed in India and spread across the Himalayan regions, Tibet, China, Japan, Indonesia and Burma. Its Tibetan form came to Central Asia, Mongolia, China and Siberia, and nowadays it is found around the world at large (Stoddard in Dodin – Rätther 2001: 7–8, 226). Tibetan Buddhism provides elaborate rites and rituals. Notable features are beneficent and protective deities and their complex iconography.

³ Tibetan Buddhism and its culture were officially adopted in Mongolia in the second half of the 16th century. However, primary sources suggest much earlier contacts and influences. Mongol Court during the Yuan dynasty ruling in the vast territory of today's China, Mongolia and southern Siberia in 1271–1368 closely cooperated with high lamas of Tibetan Buddhism, and close contacts were kept even after the fall of the dynasty, see Serruys 1966: 165, 173. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Mongols were a part of multi-national and multi-cultural Empire with Manchu-ethnic Qing dynasty rulers who were supporters of Tibetan Buddhism. Mongolia thus represents the culture heavily influenced by Tibetan Buddhism.

In the West, Tibet received a dual image. Westerners saw Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism both in positive and negative terms, as *the pristine and the polluted, the authentic and the derivative, the holy and the demonic, the good and the bad* (Lopez 1998: 4). The opposing mental constructs played an important part in the Western relationship with Asia, and it has appeared until today (Lopez 1998: 4). Fiction, movies, visual arts, graphic novels and commercials often employ images of Buddhist statues, paintings and ritual implement, where they are displayed as symbols of either goodness or demonic (Brauen 2000).

The material objects⁴ from Tibet, especially ritual items, paintings and statues were introduced to Europe as early as in the 19th century (Harris 2014: 22–25). In the land of its origins, the items served for religious purposes, while in the West they gained other additional meanings. In Tibet, and areas under the influence of Tibetan culture, they serve as *rten* (རྩེན་), i.e. support of the enlightened body, speech and mind. According to this view, painting and sculptures are inhabited by the deity, and as such, they are used for a variety of religious purposes (Stoddard in Dodin – Räther 2001: 224, 245). Their aesthetic values are without doubt also perceived, however, their functions are larger than pure aesthetic pleasure for the audience. They are hardly understood out of the religious context. In the West, they have been seen as aesthetic delights as well as objects of religious inspiration, especially when Buddhism became known and appreciated among Westerners (Harris 2014: 21). Artifacts from Tibet were described in connoisseurs' and scholarly journals as early as in the late 19th century, and in the first half of the 20th century, they were earnestly studied.⁵ The early works did not omit comparison with Greco-Buddhist art from Central Asia those representations of Buddha influenced images of him in Tibetan Buddhism. The comparison between those two artistic traditions, nevertheless, in the context of the learned connoisseurship of the late 19th and early 20th century elevated Tibetan artifacts to a level of highly appreciated Greek art⁶. Tibetan artifacts were also studied in relations to Buddhist teachings and legends captured in written sources as if the connection to texts justified its study.⁷ Despite a large amount of scholarly literature, Tibetan artifacts received recognition as works of a distinctive art tradition relatively late. Even in the 1960s, when Asian art, in general was introduced to audiences in the United States, Tibetan art was still not widely appreciated (Lopez 1998: 136–137). The objects from Tibet were usually seen as repetitive works of anonymous artists who merely combined elements from Indian and Chinese traditions (Stoddard in Dodin – Räther 2001: 231). However; it was not until much later, in the 1990s, that Tibetan objects became recognized as *a distinctive body of fine art, equal in aesthetic value to any other artistic tradition in the world* (Stoddard in Dodin – Räther 2001: 225).⁸ In the art market, Tibetan art also gained a respectable reputation. Simultaneously, scholarships in Tibetan art have concentrated on identification of

⁴ For the purpose of this study, the objects from Tibet in the Náprstek Museum are described as "objects", "items" and "artifacts". They are treated not as art but as the source form material study. See Hannan and Longair 2017: X. However, the term "Tibetan art" is used if scholarly works are quoted.

⁵ See Roerich 1925; Getty 1914; Bell 1931; Tucci 1949; Bailey 1936.

⁶ See "Buddhist Art like Greek" – <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3903427> [1 October 2018].

⁷ See Oldenburg and Wiener 1897.

⁸ Among the influential exhibitions, "Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet" held in the Asian art Museum of San Francisco in 1991–1992 challenged the scholarly opinion about Tibetan art.

deities, and datation, chronology and origin of artworks (Luczanits 2001: 133). Scholars' erudition has been largely based upon this knowledge, although it is namely the art market that has benefit from the information.

The above-mentioned approaches to Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan objects are important to note when dealing with the history and characteristic of private collections in the Czech lands in the first half of the 20th century, and subsequently in the Náprstek Museum. Tibetan objects were collected and presented in museums around Europe for various reasons, whether it was aesthetic, religious, and political. For Britain in the 19th and 20th century collecting Tibet represented its political demarcation of the colonial power, while the "museumizing" of Tibet epitomized the appropriation of Tibetan culture, an allegory for a culture locked away, kept for safekeeping, and eventually neutralized in a set of objects (Harris 2012: 3–4). Czech lands in the late 19th century and the early 20th century, however, did not share the colonial discourse with European political powers. Their experience was not comparable with the domestic political and social circumstances, and "collecting Tibet" represented different meanings in Bohemia as opposed to other European countries.

The Provenance: Tibet in the Náprstek Museum

The collections in the Náprstek Museum contain approximately five hundred objects labeled as Tibetan in the Museum acquisition books that were acquired during the 20th century.⁹ The earliest acquisition from Tibet actually came from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) China. During the Qing dynasty, its Manchu rulers were patrons of Tibetan Buddhism. The palace Yonghegong 雍和宮 in Beijing, rebuilt partially as a monastery in the early 18th century represents one of the important Tibetan Buddhism institutions in China. The ruins of the monastery were photographed by Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), a Czech traveler and photographer who visited China during the final stage of the Boxer Rebellion in 1901.¹⁰ After his arrival home, Vráz donated a set of paper scrolls of prayers printed on sheets of paper in 1903. According to the description in the Museum acquisition book, the items were Tibetan and came from a temple north of Beijing.¹¹ In 1937 the Náprstek Museum acquired two bronze statues from the large estate of Růžena Trnožková (data not known). Mrs. Trnožková collected Chinese and Japanese textiles, however; her collection also contained other art and craft objects. In the acquisition book, the statue of the Lord of Death, Yama with his consort dated to the 17th century was described as "Jamasak (sic!) Statuette, Imitation chinesische Tibet", and the other statues as "Buddha, Tibetanische Arbeit".¹² In 1943 and in 1955 the museum obtained a vast collection of nearly nine thousand objects from Joe Hloucha (1881–1957). Hloucha, a well-known person in Prague intellectual society, was a fashionable writer of sentimental novels set in Japan. He had been interested in Japan since his youth, and in the 1920s and 1930s, he earned fame as an art connoisseur. He was a prolific collector of Japanese art, but he also collected items from other regions of Asia. Sixteen large

⁹ Later acquisitions from the second half of the 20th century from contemporary travellers and the purchases on the antiquities market are not discussed in this study.

¹⁰ Inv. No. As I 7056. Glass plate, 20 x 12 cm. Author E. S. Vráz. Photoarchive of the Náprstek Museum – <http://vadmecum.nm.cz/nm/> [1 October 2018].

¹¹ Inv. Nos. 3387–3494.

¹² Inv. Nos. 20327, 20486.

painting and small votive pictures of Tibetan Buddhism deities in his collection represented mostly high-quality works of art.¹³ Joe Hloucha dated them to the period from the 17th to the 19th century (Kraemerová – Šejbl 2007: 68) however; he did not state where he had purchased them. The first provable items from Tibet were acquired in 1957. Nineteen textile items including a dress and rugs were donated by the “Tibetan government” to the Czechoslovak team who presented new trucks designed for the army Praga V-3-S and Tatra 111 in 1956 in China.¹⁴

Two hundred items described as Tibetan came to the museum during the decade from the mid-1940s to mid-1950s. Mostly they came in 1949, as the result of the state policy of the political, social and economic restoration after the establishment of Communist Czechoslovakia in 1948. Between 1940 and 1945 a series of decrees were drafted by the Czechoslovak exile government that dealt with the rebuilding of the post-war state including denazification. The ethnic German inhabitants of Czechoslovakia were expelled from the country, and art objects and antiquities from about one million apartments were confiscated as the enemies’ property (Uhlíková 2004: 25). The *National Renewal Fund* [*Fond Národní obnovy*] administrated the inventory in 1946–1947. In 1947 the *National Cultural Commission* [*Národní kulturní komise*] managed the register and the further distribution of confiscated objects. The objects were gathered in the places designed for their storage, usually nationalized castles and country houses of former aristocratic families. The majority of confiscated objects was handed to museums and newly established institutions of antiquities conservation (Uhlíková 2004: 25–26). Náprstek Museum obtained a large collection of Asian objects, including the Tibetan artifacts.

Bronze **statues** of deities (78 items) formed the majority of the objects [Pl. 1]¹⁵. Forty-one **paintings** ranged from small votive paintings to large painted scrolls of high-quality craftsmanship [Pl. 4]. **Ritual implements** (66 items) represented the array of objects similar to other museum collections from the late 19th and early 20th century: ritual daggers, praying wheels, votive clay tablets, skull cup bowls, thigh-bone trumpets, vajras and bells [Pl. 2, 3].

The Labels: Objects and Their Description

The transfer of the objects to the Náprstek Museum in the 1950s meant interruption of the historical ownership¹⁶, and consequently a loss of detailed information about their provenance that would have accompanied the objects. Their original meaning, as well as their newly gained meaning in their former private collections, were lost, and they

¹³ Paintings, Inv. Nos. 17477, 20319, 20320, 20820, 32050, 32051, 32928, 32929, 33412, 33413, 33414, 33415, 34153, 34219, 34220, 48523, wooden/bronze statues, Inv. Nos. 16177, 20830, 20328, 20795, 32829, a tea vessel, Inv. No. 20326.

¹⁴ Inv. Nos. 13839–13846, 16400–16404, 16471, 27125, 29120, 46009, 47673–67674.

¹⁵ The artifacts presented on the plates were selected among the large collection especially for their aesthetic visual qualities, however the author is aware that this approach supports the view of Tibetan artifacts as works of art.

¹⁶ Only one item (Inv. No. 14219), a bronze statue of Avalokiteshvara (height 18,5 cm) came to the Náprstek Museum in 1948 also with the name of the previous owner of German nationality from the North Bohemia region. In the acquisition book, the statue is described as a “Chinese lamaistic bronze. Late Ming dynasty”. “Lamaistic” refers to the Western term roughly synonymous with Tibetan Buddhism. See Lopez 1996.

became museum items. As such, and without their original context and acquisition history before they appeared in the Museum, the objects were treated by the then curators only as visually appealing items. They were labeled as Tibetan, however, it is not clear today whether the designation of their place of origin was based either upon comparison with similar items in a scholarly work period or on some earlier, today unavailable sources. Nevertheless, the curators in the 1950s devoted great effort to the formal description based upon visual observation.

Visual qualities were described in meticulous detail. The curator, whom we do not know today, focused on the depiction details that caught his eyes and that he was able to understand, such as deities' robes and jewelry, the thrones they sat on, and weapons and attributes they hold in their hands. Descriptions were accompanied with large, detailed and precise ink drawing. Inscriptions of Chinese Era Names¹⁷ and mantras in Tibetan were also painstakingly drawn down, however, without knowledge of Chinese and Tibetan scripts and writing conventions. The names of deities and Buddhist authorities were given in Sanskrit and in a transliteration of Tibetan language. For the identification of deities, authors used scholarly books available in the Náprstek Museum: *Buddhastatuen. Ursprung und Formen der Buddhagestalt* by Leonhard Adam (Adam 1925), *Mythologie des Buddhismus in Tibet unter der Mongolei* by Albert Grünwedel (Grünwedel 1900) and Eugen Pander's *Das Pantheon des Tschangtscha Hukuktu* (Pander 1890).

Conclusion: Colonial or National

The earliest items from Tibet appeared in Europe in the mid-19th century. At the turn of the 19th and 20th century, interest in Tibetan culture had a political context. In Great Britain, for example, the definition of unique characteristics of Tibetan culture became a political issue closely linked with the imperial policy. Colonial explorations and expeditions were conducted with the opinion that other countries were to serve for benefit of colonial powers. Objects of material culture were greatly removed from their original settings and appropriated in the homes of Europeans (Harris 2012: 2, 3, 18). Objects from pre-1950s Tibet reached Europe in large numbers, not to mention objects of Tibetan Buddhism from Qing dynasty China that came even in the mid-19th century.

As opposed to the colonial powers, Bohemia in the late 19th century and Czechoslovakia in the first half of the 20th century did not belong among the countries with colonial experience. Although many travelers, diplomats, officers and clerks visited foreign countries, sometimes at the service of great colonial states, their collections can hardly be included in the colonial discourse of the period. However, they were part of the 19th century intellectual appropriation of the knowledge and collecting. Tibet was well known through translations of travel books. Buddhism was also known due to works by Czech-speaking philosophers.¹⁸ Despite the interest in Japanese and Chinese paintings and sculpture being without dispute stronger, statues and paintings of Tibetan Buddhism were available to those who were interested in them.

¹⁷ Mainly the emperor Qianlong era (1736–1795).

¹⁸ Buddhism, especially its early form, was known in works of Czech-speaking scholars even in the 19th century, however, its spread was rather limited. In the early 20th century, Buddhism was propagated by some thinkers as a new religion suitable for Czech society (Rozehnalová 2008: 159, 168). However, making a direct link between knowledge of Buddhism among Czech-speaking academia and collecting of Tibetan Buddhism religious objects by private collectors can be misleading.

However, those objects were in private collections of collectors who were not close to the intellectual circle formed around the Náprstek Museum in the late 19th and the early 20th century. Their collections came to the Museum much later, in the 1950s, at the time of denazification and nationalization during the establishment of the Communist Czechoslovakia in 1948. The confiscated collections were nationalized and transferred from private ownership to the State Museum. As the result, the history of original ownership was interrupted. The objects became museum property without history of original context as well as without the knowledge about circumstances when, where and by whom they were collected. As they became museum objects without a history, they were treated merely as beautiful objects.

In post-war Czechoslovakia, the Tibet collection in the Náprstek Museum became a part of the national cultural heritage, instead of the manifestation of colonial appropriation of the otherness. It became an integral part of our settlement with the social and political pre-war memory, and as such, today it witnesses more to our historical context than to our reception of Tibet and Tibetan culture.

Pl. 1

Inv. No. 14198

Metal (bronze) statue of Chakrasamvara¹⁹, one of the most popular deities in Tantric Buddhism. The statue is a part of the Náprstek Museum collections since 1949. Height 19,8 cm.

Chakrasamvara appears in many forms. Here he is portrayed with twelve hands, embracing his consort Vajravarahi. Many of the deity's attributes are lost today; only a vajra and a bell, the elephant skin, a curved knife, damaru bell and a skull-cup remained. An axe, trident, a Tantric staff khatvanga, vajra lasso and the head of Brahma are missing. In the museum acquisition books, the detailed description of the statue is accompanied with an ink drawing. The author of the description employed terminology such as "jidam", "gri-gug", and "Buddha Šamvara-rádža"²⁰. A reference was given: Grünwedel 1999: picture on page 103. The author dated the statue according to the Chinese inscription in the year 1770 however, according to the inscription on the statue it was made during the Qianlong Emperor era (1735–1796).

Pl. 2

Inv. No. 14156

Metal ritual vase with turquoise and a pouring spout. The sprinkler with peacock feathers was added later. A part of the Náprstek Museum collections since 1949. Height 21,2 cm.

In the museum acquisition books, there is an ink drawing of the object. The author of the description used terminology: "bum-pa, kaláš".²¹ There is also the inscription of the common Sanskrit mantra "om mani padme hum" identified by the author. There are two references: Pander 1890, and Grünwedel 1900.

¹⁹ For the orthography of the names, see <https://www.himalayanart.org/>, for terminology, see Beer, 1999.

²⁰ Yidam, a meditational deity, gri gug, a curved knife used in Tantric ceremonies. The terminology in quotation marks is given as in the Czech language Náprstek museum acquisition book.

²¹ The term "kaláš" is the Czech language pronunciation of the original Sanskrit term *kalaśa*, in Tibetan: bum pa.

Pl. 3

Inv. No. 14180

A libation vessel made of human cranium, mounted with metal, with a lid in a handle in form of a half-thunderbolt, embellished with red coral, turquoise, and images of human skulls. In the Náprstek Museum collections since 18 January 1946, the ZNV (*Zemský národní výbor, Komise pro zajištění národního majetku*)²². Its original provenance is not known. Height 18 cm, length 18,5 cm.

Skull cups served as ritual vessels for a number of deities of Tibetan Buddhism. In Europe, a skull cup was exhibited in 1862 during the International Exhibition of Arts in London. The skull cup described as “the skull of Confucius” caused a sensation. Due to its craftsmanship, its presumed origin as a relic of a great Chinese philosopher, and its original assumed ownership by the Chinese emperor represented the “Chineseness” in the eyes of the British audience (Harris 2012: 34). It was not until the 1890s when the skull cups begun being appraised as Tibetan Buddhism ritual object (Harris 2012: 36–37).

Pl. 4

Inv. No. 14196

Painting of Palden Lhamo. The exact date of acquisition not given: presumably the late 1940s and early 1950s. Height 80 cm, width 50 cm (painting 43 x 35 cm). The painting is mounted in a simple textile frame.

Palden Lhamo is depicted according to the Gelug tradition; with two hands she holds a vajra-tipped club and a skull-cup. Extreme wrathful with flying hair, her half-naked body of dark blue color is covered by a loose dress, tiger skin and a speckled snake around her lower part, and a sword. She rides a mule across a river of blood, and carries around her saddle a bag of disease and black and white dice, a thread weapon.

The description is detailed. The author gives the names of deities “Makaravttra” (Makaramukha with the face of a crocodile-like mythical creature) and “Simhavaktra” (Simhamukha with the face of a snow lion) who are depicted on both sides of Palden Lhamo. Above the central figure, there are three figures: Tsongkapa (1357–1419), the Fifth Panchen Lama Lobsang Yeshe (1663–1737) on his right, and the 5th Dalailama Ngagwang Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682) with a book and a lotus on his left. The author of the description in the acquisition book cited Grünwedel 1900: 66, 52.

²² *The Land National Committee* administrated the Czechoslovakia between 1945–1948. The *National Property Commission* administrated property confiscated on the basis of presidential decrees.

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Pl. 1



Pl. 2



Pl. 3



Pl. 4