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DE-CONTEXTUALISATION OR RE-CONTEXTUALISATION: TIBETAN BUDDHISM IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: The study based on the preparation of *Příběh Tibetu* [*The Story of Tibet*] exhibition in the Náprstek Museum focuses on the de-contextualisation of Tibetan Buddhism objects in the museum setting. It deals with the stages of the de-contextualisation process from the removing of the original material environment and social context to creation of new meanings in the museum. Namely it discusses aestheticisation and its relation to the art-gallery style exhibition.

KEY WORDS: Museum collections – museum exhibitions – art – artifacts – aestheticisation – Tibetan and Mongolian objects

Displaying objects from other cultures bring inevitable and hardly solvable questions. The objects that are taken from their original context are placed into a new context and eventually viewed, evaluated and interpreted by scholars as well as the general audience. During this process, which can take from a short period of time to several decades, the objects acquire new meanings while they are dispossessed of the original one. This process, called “de-contextualisation”, is well known to anthropologists as well as museologists.² It is a common process through which we study, familiarise and appreciate the otherness, and at the same time, through which we form our opinions about other cultures. For these reasons, de-contextualisation and the consequent re-creation of a new meaning plays a crucial part in the museum exhibitions, especially when museum exhibitions target is the general public, in order to bring them information and shape their opinions.

Visitors to the Náprstek Museum in Prague are of varying age-groups; from schoolchildren to senior citizens with different levels of education and experience with

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² For the purpose of clarity I use two opposite terms later in the study: de-contextualisation, and re-contextualisation in order to depict two significant stages of the process. Both terms are written with a hyphen.

consumption of cultural events in general. The Museum aims at creating a visitor-friendly space where people can meet together to find new information and enjoy their time. This infotainment museum culture, however, meets as well as contradicts with various expectations and experience of museum visitors. Especially when the museums are no longer a unique source of information about other cultures, and modern visitors can compare their museum experience with other forms such as travelling. However, museums still offer an exclusive experience in close visual explorations of objects of other cultures, past and present.

This unique feature, however, represents a challenge for curators of museum exhibitions in regards to how they should prepare the displays; in order to represent or best translate the desired idea to the large and diverse audience. During the preparation of the exhibition *Příběh Tibetu* [*The Story of Tibet*] which ran from March to September 2017, this idea of representation was questioned. The main aim of the exhibition was to bring the history of Tibetan culture in its broadest meaning, especially the spread of Tibetan Buddhism. The framework of this preparation was marked by two points, first; the exhibition is almost solely based on objects from the Náprstek Museum that consisted mostly of religious items, and the second, the relatively good knowledge about Tibet in the Czech Republic, although the more imaginary Tibet than the real one.

During the preparation of the exhibition, I often questioned the importance of choice in the exhibit, the design, as well as the general social context. I believe that those three points: the exhibits, design and general context play a crucial role in the perception of the exhibition by its audience. The choice of exhibits and the general context was more or less given. However, I considered different styles of display and its outcomes, namely an “art gallery” style and a “realistic” style. I was especially concerned with the idea of how the style of display shaped the visitors’ experience, and how the display influenced the visitors’ process of de-contextualisation.

When dealing with the “art” and “realistic” styles of display, the study provided by Fanny Wonu Veys (2010) was very helpful. The author who was involved in both events compared two Oceania exhibitions held in the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As for the exhibitions about Tibet, recent studies by Emma Martin (2017) and by Imogen Clark (2016) focused on exhibitions in countries with colonial pasts and long-time relationship with Tibet, which signified a starting point for my reflection about the role that Tibet plays in the Czech Republic.

This study is divided into two parts. The first part is dealing with the above-mentioned two points: the exhibits and general context. It is devoted to the history of Tibet exhibitions in the Náprstek Museum; including the history of the collection. Because knowledge about Tibet is relatively deep among Czech audiences, it depicts shortly its development and context. The second part is focused on the depiction of the process of de-contextualisation. Consequently, it describes the different types of exhibition designs and its influence on the construction of new meanings of museum objects. The conclusion returns to the example of *Příběh Tibetu* [*The Story of Tibet*] exhibition while trying to summarize the role of exhibits choice, design and overall social context.

Exhibiting Tibetan Buddhism in the Náprstek Museum

Tibetan Buddhism is not unknown to Czech audiences and it is still present in Czech culture. Tibetan Buddhism has appeared in the works of Czech philosophers and Indologists since the late 19th century.³ Tibetan Buddhism paintings were exhibited in 1931 at the exhibition held by the *Spolek výtvarných umělců* [Fine Arts Association] in the Mánes Building in Prague.⁴ In addition to this, Czech translations of a theosophist and famous traveller Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969) aimed at the broad public were published in the 1930s, only a few years after their original issues⁵. New editions followed from the 1940s until the 1990s, even during the Communist regime that suppressed the spread of any kind of religious teachings. Since the early 1990s, Tibet and its position in international politics have been a regularly discussed topic in the Czech press. Simultaneously, Tibet, as well as neighbouring countries has become a target for holiday travellers and sportsmen. Due to the tradition which Tibet maintains in Czech culture⁶, the general audience have always had the opportunity to acquire at least the basic knowledge about its geography and history, not to mention contemporary politics. Every year in March; since the early 1990s, the government buildings and institutions from the top to the local level post the Tibetan flag as a symbol of the fight for human rights. However, the Tibetan flag is often used as a part of political campaigns. As such, posting the flag is commented on by the media and reflected on by a fraction of the citizens. On the other hand, articles that appear regularly every spring in the media constantly raise awareness about Tibet in Czech society.

Much the same as Tibet is a part of Czech's social, artistic and political lives since the early 20th century, collecting Tibetan objects; namely paintings, statues and ritual implements has also a century-long tradition. However, it is important to note that the early collectors often did not distinguish between objects from Tibet, northern India, China, and Mongolia, especially because they collected religious items of Tibetan Buddhism that had spread around the vast territory⁷.

Many objects were transferred from regional museums after World War II. These collections came from the property of aristocratic houses, diplomats, military officers and well-travelled entrepreneurs. Although they became a significant source for the Náprstek Museum collection, acquisitions during the politically turbulent years mean

³ Among the early philosophers who mentioned Tibetan Buddhism belonged František Čupr (1821–1882), and Rudolf Máša (1880–1954).

⁴ *Umění Tibetu, Mongolska a současné Číny* [Art from Tibet, Mongolia and contemporary China]. Catalogue of the Exhibition. Praha: SVU Mánes, 1931. The exhibition was held in 2–28. September, 1931.

⁵ *Žebrácké holi do svatého města (cesta Pařížanky do Lhasy)*. Tr. H. Jost. Praha: Česká grafická unie, 1931. Translation of *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhasa, 1927. Mystikové a magové v Tibetě*. Tr. Jiří Vičar. Praha: Česká grafická unie, 1934. Translated and revised version of *Mystiques et Magiciens du Tibet, 1929. V zemi lupičů-kavalírů*. Tr. J.O.Novotný. Praha: Česká akciová tiskárna, 1937. Translated and revised version of *Grand Tibet. Au pays des brigands-gentilshommes, 1933*.

⁶ Translations of major works of Tibetan Buddhist literature are available by Josef Kolmaš (1933). Scholarly studies are presented by Luboš Bělka (1958), Daniel Berounský (1972), and Martin Slobodník (1970). Contemporary authors of travelogs, photographers and filmmakers contribute to general knowledge about Tibetan culture among the wide audience.

⁷ The earliest items among the museum acquisitions are prayers printed on paper collected by the traveller Enrique Stanto Vráz (1860–1932) who photographed in 1901 the Boxer Uprising in China. The paper prayers were described as Tibetan in the museum acquisition logs.

that it is difficult to trace their very origin today. Despite the lack of information about the origin of the items, their character reveals much about the history of collecting. Most of them were aesthetically pleasing objects such as bronze sculptures of deities, ritual objects and paintings in particular, and without a doubt, the objects of such qualities adorned many private collections.

Despite the permanent presence of Tibet in Czech academia, artistic circles and general society, the first exhibition in the Náprstek Museum was held only in 1956. The exhibition called *Neznámý Tibet* [*Unknown Tibet*] contained items from the Náprstek Museum and several regional museums as well as the photographs taken by the Czech photographer Josef Vaniš (1927–2009) who had travelled to Tibet between 1954–1955.⁸ The exhibition praised the modern development such as agriculture, medicine and schooling in Tibet within the newly established the People's Republic of China. Besides the photographs that documented the modernisation of Tibet, the religious paintings, sculpture and ritual objects from the Náprstek Museum as well as from other museums in then Czechoslovakia were displayed.

Tibet is perceived by Western audience mainly through religious art and Buddhism (Clark 2016; Martin 2017). However, Tibetan Buddhism is spread over a vast area of the Himalayan region, as well as China and Mongolia. Tibetan Buddhism religious objects from particular areas are hardly identifiable by the general museum audience. Even the Tibetan Buddhism religious objects from China were labelled “Tibetan” in Náprstek Museum acquisition records from the first half of the 20th century. That was partly also the case of objects that came to the museum since the 1960s to the 1990s from the large collection of Czechoslovak experts working in Mongolia within the COMECON project⁹. Although the Czechoslovak experts lived and worked in Mongolia for extended periods of time, their collections contained almost exclusively Tibetan Buddhism religious objects; namely clay offerings, small votive paintings, leaves of Tibetan script written books, etc. Ethnographical items were not collected despite the fact that many experts enjoyed greatly their sojourn in Mongolia, met local people and travelled across the country.

Due to the history of Náprstek Museum collection, the main part of approximately three thousand objects represents the religious items, namely: paintings, statues, offerings, traditional books, and ritual implement including musical instruments. The Museum collection almost lacks the ethnographic objects¹⁰.

⁸ Kršňák František, Vladimír Sís, Josef Vaniš and Lumír Jisl. *Neznámý Tibet*. Catalogue of the Exhibition, Praha: Náprstkovo museum, 1956. In the 1950s, several travelogues and popular books about Tibet written by Czech scholars and journalists were published: Beba, Karel. *Tajemný Tibet* (Mysterious Tibet). Praha, 1958, Sís, Vladimír and Josef Vaniš. *Tibet*. Praha: Naše vojsko, 1958. Sís, Vladimír and Josef Vaniš. *Země zastaveného času* (The Land where the Time Has Stopped). Praha: Mladá Fronta, 1959. Poucha, Pavel. *Do nitra Asie* (Into the Heart of Asia). Praha: Orbis, 1962.

⁹ Czechoslovakia belonged to the first members of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance established by the Soviet Union and other countries of the Eastern Block in 1949. Mongolia joined the COMECON in 1962. Czechoslovakia and the Mongolian People's Republic signed the mutual agreement in 1963.

¹⁰ A collection of approximately one hundred pieces of Mongolian traditional dress, hats and boots from the 1980s was given by the government of the Mongolian People's Republic. A few pieces of Tibetan rugs were donated to the Náprstek Museum in 1957 as “Dar čínské tibetské vlády členům kolektivu čs. pracovníků provádějících roku 1956 služební cestu vozů Praga V-3-S a Tatra 111” [“The gift of the Chinese Tibetan Government to the Czechoslovak workers during their travel in Praga V-3-S and Tatra 111 cars”], according to the museum acquisition logs.

The characteristic of the Náprstek Museum collection set the first prerequisite for the exhibition. The exhibition contained fourteen large panels with texts about the history of Tibet from its beginning to the present. The texts were accompanied with photographs from various photographers dated from the early 20th century to the 1950s from the museum photo collection. The texts paid attention to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism and influence of the Tibetan culture on Mongolia and Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Material culture represented Tibetan Buddhism ritual implements and paintings from Tibet, China and Mongolia dated from the 18th to the 20th century from the museum collection. Due to a lack of ethnographical items in the collection, male, female and monks' clothes as well as jewellery were borrowed from a private owner for the exhibition.

Paintings – large *thangkas* as well as small votive *tsaklis* formed a majority of exhibits, where their visual aesthetics served the base for the exhibition design. The textile panelling of dark red colour resembling monks' robes bore enlarged photographs of the paintings as well as photographs made by Czech travellers. The paintings were hung on the panelling while small votive paintings, sculptures and ritual objects were placed in the display cases [Pl. 1].

Due to the history of the Náprstek collection and its lack of ethnographical artifacts such as clothing, furniture, utensils of every-day use, the exhibition relied on religious objects: ritual implements, paintings and sculptures. For the exhibition, the well preserved and aesthetically pleasing objects were selected. The choice was necessary and natural because objects that can suffer during an exhibition or can easily deteriorate cannot be displayed. However, the choice among the potential exhibits was made in order to attract visitors and present those objects with notable stories, as well as present objects that are aesthetically pleasing for Western visitors. Nevertheless, this choice raised questions whether a selection of aesthetically pleasing objects can really help visitors become immersed in Tibetan culture, or if an aesthetic display supported the opinion that the “other” culture is so incomprehensible that only an aesthetic approach could lead visitors to a partial understanding. Thus, the choice impelled further examination in how the visitors perceived the objects; whether they learned about Tibetan culture through the objects and how the objects and their installation shaped their knowledge.

Since the late 19th century, the collections in the Náprstek Museum contained ethnographical artifacts together with artworks of great world cultures. Since its conception, the Náprstek Museum exhibitions did not make a clear distinction between *aesthetic objects* and *ethnographic objects*; both type of objects are exhibited together in order to provide the general picture of other cultures. I believe that this unique feature of the Náprstek Museum's collection is due to the fact that the museum was founded by a layman, and stood outside the academia and art circles. Furthermore, the distinction between *ethnographic objects* (artifacts) and *aesthetic objects* (art) in social sciences as well as in museology resulted from the development of academic disciplines in the 19th century that distinguished between “art history” and “anthropology” (Veys 2010: 263–264). This point of view was based upon the presumption that aesthetically pleasing objects were distinguished from the other objects by visual perception, due to their specific properties such as form and colours (Schaeffer 2004: 25–26). Since its conception, the Náprstek Museum aimed to collect all the material products of humankind and did not distinguish between aesthetic and ethnographic objects. Consequently, the Náprstek

Museum traditionally used “artistic” and “ethnographic” exhibition styles. Whereas one style presents the objects in art-gallery settings, and the other one focuses on re-creating the original context of objects¹¹, the Náprstek Museum tradition often combines both styles.

De-contextualisation and new meanings

The design of an exhibition has an impact on the perception and interpretation of objects by the audience. The exhibited objects are removed from their original context and placed before the eyes of an audience who know little about their original meaning and cultural and social significance. The same object presented in a different exhibition design is interpreted either as “art”, or an ethnographic item, this is the setting in which the objects are perceived and evaluated by the audience. In order to understand the objects, the audience creates a new frame of reference based on their own cultural and social knowledge, generating a new meaning for the objects.

The first phase in the process of de-contextualisation is the removal of the object¹² from its original place. This means the loss of the social context and consequently loss of the social function and meaning. Once the object loses its function and meaning, it becomes merely a material remnant, a shadow of its former “life”, it is “ruined”, and becomes only an “allegory” (Déotte 2001: 16). In the museum setting, the object is placed into the depot or presented to the visitors where it is either submitted to the scholar or general audience. Its former “self” is shrouded in the past, and the new one waits to be created.

The reverse process of creating a new meaning is based on an effort to re-create and re-install its lost cultural function and meaning. However, things have no inherent meanings, but their manifold meanings reflect the complex relationship between people and things. We are all born “into a culture”, and since our birth interact with things; we learn how to use them and what they mean, we give them their meanings, collective as well as individual (Roth 2001: 572).

The effort to establish a meaning of objects leads, however, to various outcomes. Either the new context based vaguely on the original one is generated, or a new one is envisaged.

One possible way to create meaning is to appreciate the objects by their aesthetic dimension. This means that the objects are perceived according to their shapes, forms and colours: they are “aestheticised”. According to popular belief; aesthetically

¹¹ The depiction of two styles was provided by Fanny Wonu Veys in the article “Art or artifact: is that the question?” who compared two Oceania exhibition held in the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fanny Wonu Veys was involved in both projects as a curator and researcher. The “art” style exhibition at MAA included art works by contemporary native artists and represented contemporary ethnography, while the Metropolitan Museum of Art stressed the “timeless” beauty of de-contextualised and aestheticised ethnographic items.

¹² The terms “objects”, “items”, and “artifacts” are used in this study to depict the material side of culture. The neutral term “thing” as well as the term “entangled object” denoting the object with a meaning are also employed in scholarly studies (Veys 2010: 263). It is important to note that academic disciplines like archaeology are based upon study of “things”, whereas disciplines based primarily on study of written sources often neglected material side of cultures. It is only since the late 20th century when the “material turn” gained reputation and studies about material culture were published in abundance.

pleasant objects reflect an eternal and universal beauty, they are understood as “timeless” (Veys 2010: 275), as “art”, even though ethnographical objects were not art at all in their original context. In this process of “aestheticisation”, the “art” was created from what was not art.¹³

Aestheticisation takes the visible form for the essence, and gives the new meaning to objects by seeing them as beautiful; however, another possible way to give a “new” meaning to objects is “abstraction”. Objects placed in the new context are not understood as “particular” objects – tokens – with particular characteristics, but as “types”, the concepts of objects. Their peculiarities are omitted, and the abstracted objects represent the general idea of the object. This approach may be useful if it is used for didactic purposes because it reduces the redundant details in order to present basic formal characteristics. However, the basic characteristic is also based upon outward visual traits; objects from different cultures are often judged as similar “types” with similar looks and due to this, a similar social function. It is based upon a common belief that the “language of things is universal” (Roth 2001: 573), and “things” and their meanings are understood universally. However, meanings of “things” are culture-specific and arbitrary, but “due to the outward similarity or identity of artifacts, this fact is often ignored” (Roth 2001: 573). This approach is especially evident with the Tibetan clothing in the 2017 exhibition when the visitors supposed that hair ornaments made of semi-precious stones were actually a necklace due to its visual similarity with European jewellery. On one hand, abstraction can help to understand the objects from other cultures, however; on the other hand it easily blurs the significant differences that are crucial for deep understanding.

Conclusion: the social context

Abstraction and aestheticisation creates a new meaning for the objects and their placement in a new environment and closes the process of de- and re-contextualisation. The art gallery display emphasises the aestheticisation of the objects, and the visitor is expected to be able to perceive their uniqueness and beauty.¹⁴ Aestheticisation without a doubt can bring a pleasant experience if the visitor is able to appreciate the aestheticised objects.¹⁵ However, gallery displays present the objects as single entities that have no

¹³ Especially the so-called tribal (folk, traditional) arts are aestheticised by the Western audience. As pointed out by Denis Button, “objects of tribal art are sometimes so strange to us that we cannot tell immediately whether they are intended to be works of art (or some local analogue of what we should call art) at all” (Dutton 1993: 13). About the early modernists and tribal arts see Errington 1994; Torgovnick 1989.

¹⁴ About the perception of art in the art museums, see Kesner 2003, 2006. Ladislav Kesner critically assesses visitors’ ability to perceive art, and he advocates the necessity to learn how to see art. According to Kesner, museums nowadays focus on various educational and entertainment goals, while the ability to read art declines among the broad audience. On the other hand, Jean-Marie Schaeffer discusses the “‘bonne’ muséification cognitive” and “‘mauvaise’ muséification esthétique” (Schaeffer 2004: 33). However, Kesner focuses on art museums, while Schaeffer on museums in general.

¹⁵ If the visitor is able to observe the objects sufficiently. Theorists have discussed in length the question of how the aesthetic objects in the museum are perceived by visitors. Everyday perception of visual culture is not a good preparation for perception of objects in the museum because a common visitor is unable to develop a “sufficiently attentive vision” (Kesner 2003: 102). However, there is no “good” or “required” observation of museum objects (Kesner 2006: 5).

direct relationship between each other and between them and their original culture. This pinpoints only the visible side of the objects and obscures their original functions and context.

As opposed to the gallery setting that responds to the visitors' aesthetic needs, I believe that the anthropological¹⁶ display focuses upon the rational mind. The anthropological display that uses the abstraction as its principle aims to restore the original context and function of objects. This approach is widely employed not only in the museum pedagogy but also in the concept of museums as places of both information and entertainment. The didactic value cannot be underestimated, however, the abstraction eliminates the diversity of tokens and highlighting the types and as a result, it can lead to oversimplification. Moreover, it assumes that the visitors possess at least some level of knowledge and builds new information upon it.

I have already noted three points that played the crucial role in the preparation of *Příběh Tibetu* [*The Story of Tibet*] as well as in the perception of Tibetan Buddhism by the visitors. The first point represents the choice of exhibits. The exhibition was based upon an aesthetically pleasing presentation of Tibetan and Mongolian ritual objects, bronze figures and paintings. The selection of objects for visual quality was based on an assumption that aestheticised objects are better perceived and understood by the broad audience, which can better serve the didactic goals of the exhibition, namely when the Náprstek Museum Tibetan and Mongolian collections primarily contain objects that can be defined as "art" according to a Western point of view.¹⁷ There are also religious objects, and exhibiting Tibet only through religious objects is mentioned by scholars in Tibetan studies as a kind of Tibetan Orientalism and kind of "ideological prison" (Lopez Jr. 1999; Clark 2016; Martin 2017). However, the collections of religious objects are part of museums' acquisition histories. They are "here" even if scholars try to reframe them into a new context; the visitors still see them as they are at the first glance. As the result, the question arises whether exhibiting them propagates the stereotypes of Tibet as an enigmatic and religious land (Brauen 2000).

I believe that the general political and social context play a role propagating or suppressing these stereotypes. I have already noted that the Czech audience is very sensitive to the political situation in Tibet. It was obvious that at least some visitors came to the museum with certain preconceptions, believing that the exhibition was supposed to fulfil their ideas. Since the exhibition was open in early March and the media, as usual, discussed the Tibetan flag displays in the Czech Republic; many visitors asked me why there was no Tibetan flag in the exhibition. The political and social situation around this increased awareness about Tibet, which proved to be more valuable to many visitors than Tibetan Buddhism and its iconography. From the point of view of political consciousness of the visitors, either "art" display or "ethnographical" display seemed to lose their meanings.

¹⁶ Imogen Clark speaks about "immersive displays" that contextualise the objects by putting them back to the original-like setting in order to encourage the visitors to appreciate them from a "more" indigenous perspective (Clark 2016). However, the visitors usually do not have "indigenous" knowledge to truly appreciate the objects, and they rely on their own culture and experience during encounters with the otherness.

¹⁷ According to my personal experience with various visitors groups during lectures about Tibetan Buddhism iconography, the visitors paid more attention to three dimensional objects such as statues and ethnographic objects than to paintings, probably because the statues corresponded better to Western notion of art and sculpture than thangka to Western paintings.

However, the religious dimension of the objects cannot be omitted. The Tibetan Buddhism objects in the Náprstek Museum that were presented in the exhibition are mostly religious. Buddhism is known amongst the Czech audience, as well as practised by several Buddhists groups, so we can assume that the visitors were at least partially familiar with Buddhist religious objects. The aesthetic display of paintings and statues represented them as similar to Western art, and the visitors are expected to enjoy them the same way as European art. However, despite the fact that the Tibetan Buddhism paintings are today considered one of the “great arts of Asia” created by “superior artisans” by the Western audience (Jackson and Jackson 2006: 1, 5), they were and still are in their cultural context appreciated as religious images. The paintings in their original context represented not only material objects, they were appreciated as supports for their non-material contexts; including rituals, written and oral texts, mythology, etc. (Schaeffer 2004: 35). Buddhas, bodhisattvas, protectors and famous teachers serve a religious purpose and as such their aesthetic function is only the secondary one. In the exhibition setting, this whole universe of meanings was lost to the visitors. The aestheticisation of objects represents a way to attract the visitors and convince them that the objects are worth of seeing, simply because they are aesthetically pleasing. This method was based upon an assumption that aesthetically pleasing objects arouse attention, and consequently further interest.

It is possible to say that aestheticisation, as well as the ethnographic approach does not exploit the full potential of the objects in the museum exhibitions. One is primarily focused on outward visuality while the other one leads to oversimplification. However, it is also necessary to consider the visitor’s knowledge of the topic as well as the general social context, since both affect the visitor’s opinion, and consequently strengthen or weaken the effects intended by the authors and curators of museum exhibitions.

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Pl. 1 The exhibition *Příběh Tibetu* [*The Story of Tibet*] in the Náprstek Museum Asian, African and American Cultures (Photo: Jiří Vaněk).