

# Analyze the Development of Tibetan Contemporary Art

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**Abstract.** The development of Tibetan contemporary art, which is divorced from the traditional Buddhist significance, faces many problems, including the common problems of contemporary art and the problems that only occur in Tibetan contemporary art. Because of their unique cultural background, Tibetan people do not accept open contemporary art and depart from traditional forms, and they have their own aesthetic standards for art. Tibetan contemporary artists are in line with the world and create advanced contemporary art works. However, when creating works, even excellent artists will use the wrong images under the complex cultural background of Tibet. This paper analyzes the problems from three aspects of Tibetan contemporary art: openness, pluralism and social responsibility, and then analyzes the results accordingly. It is found that if Tibetan people can be more inclusive and Tibetan artists can pay more attention to the cultural connotation of their works, Tibetan contemporary art will develop better.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Tibetan art; social responsibility; Tibet art.

## 1. Introduction

Tibetan art has always revolved around a mysterious, inaccessible "Shangri-La" vibe from the past to the present. In the art world, Tibetan art is either admired or despised. They believe that Tibetan art has great limitations. And they believe that Tibetan artists lack creativity. Their artworks are utilitarian, have a purpose, and serve religion. Tibetan traditional art does have this feature. Due to the cultural background of Tibetans and their religious devotion and belief, when they see works of art, they will examine them practically and rationally, and even achieve their identity through them. However, the works of contemporary art in Tibet seem to refute this view. From the period of enlightenment to the period of development, and now to the mature period, the contemporary art in Tibet, to a certain extent, can be said to have reached the period when the style is gradually finalized [1]. With the development of society and the entry of foreign cultures, cultural integration is also reflected in the development of contemporary art in Tibet. Some artists use modern techniques to express traditional things. Some artists use traditional things as material to express modern things. It is also useful to use traditional materials to express modern meaning without religious meaning. It is found that all of these artists have used traditional things. It seems that the art world's evaluation of Tibetan artists is correct to a certain extent. Because they all put the proposition of tradition into their creations. With the renewal of artistic concepts, they use their own methods to connect tradition and modernity, so as to make their artistic creations unique and innovative [2].

However, for Tibetan art, when assessing its quality and value, Tibetans will first ask themselves two questions. The first one is "Is this thing fit for its purpose?" The second one is "Is this thing made correctly?" That is, does it conform to those traditional canons that make the universal light of doctrine manifest through the particular symbolism of the object in question [3]? This is the general view of Tibetan art in the minds of Tibetans. People's appreciation of contemporary art usually attempts to start with the idea behind the behavior of contemporary art. Contemporary art is analysed and studied in order to gain a more definitive understanding of the motives behind the action and to find out why it exists. Contemporary art is very different from people's habitual and scrutinized traditional aesthetic thinking [4]. As a result, even if contemporary art in Tibet is becoming mature, it is difficult for the local people to accept open contemporary art. The lack of social responsibility for artists to transcend conventions and ethics in their creation. Art lacks contemporary works of art in a global context, which has become a problem that Tibetans need to solve.

The three problems facing contemporary Tibetan art hinder its development. After literature search, there are more abundant artist analysis, artistic style analysis, artistic material analysis. However, it is not completely based on these three elements and gives the literature on the proposed solution. In other words, there is a lack of information in this regard. Therefore, this paper discusses Tibetan contemporary art from three aspects: openness, pluralism and social responsibility. And through the corresponding Tibetan contemporary artworks to analyze the three elements. Finally, some suggestions are made based on the analysis results. The aim is to supplement this information which become the significance of this article.

## 2. Tibetan Contemporary Art

### 2.1 The Openness of Tibetan Contemporary Art

In the development of contemporary Tibetan art history, Gendun Chompel is a very important figure. Gendun Chompel's high artistic sensitivity makes his works different from other works of the same period. He integrates traditional Tibetan painting, Indian and Western knowledge, and his works are very modern. It laid the foundation for the beginning of Tibetan contemporary art [5]. In the late 1980s, the "Sweet Tea House Art Group" established by Gonkar Gyatso and others had a profound impact on the subsequent generation and development of Tibetan contemporary art. Until 2003, the contemporary Gedun Chompel art group in Tibet was established in Lhasa on the 100th birthday of Gedun Chompel. They have inherited the artistic ideas of Gedun Chompel and have shown a strong openness. By actively absorbing and integrating foreign cultures, these artists have created many new artistic languages in a wise way. A lot of popular cultures is reflected in the works of Gonkar Gyatso, the most famous contemporary artist in Tibet. For example, "Shabhala of Modern Times", "Buddha in our time", "Victory Banner", etc. Gonkar Gyatso used collage to create his own artistic language, using stickers to integrate various popular elements into Buddha statues. He uses pop culture to reinterpret the image of Buddha. Compared with the religious significance of traditional art, this form undoubtedly has a greater impact on Tibetans. In the past, Tibetan art was practical and mostly served "religious purposes". Divine teachings have the meaning of "reminder" and "difficult access to human life", Tibetans are pious about this. Whereas every attribute of traditional idols (symbolic proportions, posture, gestures, weapons, and other attributes) is traditionally determined, and each has a precise meaning [3].

As Tibetan people meet with contemporary art, this kind of unacceptable psychology inevitably arises. Gonkar Gyatso also said when he first wandered into the western courtyard, he found a bathroom with a statue of Buddha holding the handle of the door. He thinks there are so many rooms and spaces in the mansion, but the Buddha is placed on the floor of the bathroom. At that time he was stunned and a little sad. Buddha beloved by Tibetan was placed in such a place. Of his cultural background and training experience, the Buddha statue has never been placed below the line of sight, let alone in the bathroom [5]. Obviously, Gonkar Gyatso was hit, but in the face of the open Western culture, he slowly reconciled with it. He wants to use the monetary capital that Buddhism enjoys in the world as his creative theme [6]. Buddhism is his creative theme. As a contemporary artist, he has put aside his own inherent ideas, pursued his own creative style, and focused on his work. Also, there are other artists such as Xire Jiancen and Tenzeng Yangzhen. They combine traditional mandala images with flocks of birds, kites, western angels, balloons and other elements creating the "Mandala and Roots" and showing their serious religious beliefs and relationship with modern life. GaDe's works have also appeared in popular images like Hulk, Ultraman, and Spider-Man. The "new concept" thangka created by Da Qiongpie Rinpoche. Shi Danzhenpeng shows expressionism in his works of Buddha statues. Their work connects the Buddha with all beings, somewhat detached from the singularity and functionality of Tibetan art.

## 2.2 The Pluralisms of Tibetan Contemporary Art

With the advent of the Internet era, the process of globalization has accelerated, and the geographical and population limitations of contemporary art have disappeared. Many works reflect the grand theme of the common concern of all mankind. For example, ecology, environmental protection, women, human rights, etc. These are not matters of a certain field or industry. Tibetan contemporary art groups are also actively participating in global topics and paying attention to international social issues. NoTser, the founder of Tibet's NianZhe Experimental Art Space, is one of the iconic figures in Tibetan contemporary art. His artworks have extensively covered global warming, environmental degradation, the erosion of culture, the desire to establish one's own identity in the mass media and other issues of common concern to the world. For example, in his work "Memory of the Wind", prayer flags praying for blessings become wings with rich wings, which is the artist's question to himself: "How does Tibetan culture fly in the wave of globalization?" His large-scale installation art "Forbidden Area" is a scene of a strange and ferocious beast colliding with several corroded angle steel, spiral steel and a large number of pebbles and gravel. The rotten steel creates a three-dimensional feel, which in this case refers to the Himalayas, while the bizarre shapes reflect the melting of the snow-capped mountains and the collapse of the mountains. The artist is reminding people that nature can no longer bear the heavy pressure of modern civilization. Some of NoTser's other works, "War and Peace", "Wind Horse", "Regroup", "Mandala", and "Blue Planet", all focus on different social issues.

The works of Sonam Tsering, the most representative young contemporary artist in Tibet, also show the sense of artistic responsibility of contemporary Tibetan artists in a global context. His work "Lonely Rainforest" is an artist's response to the heartache of the Amazon rainforest fire in 2019. Sonam Tsering wrapped the sphere with Tibetan paper, and painted the snow-capped mountains grilled by flames with the brushstrokes of thangka, and the lonely earth longing for rain and dew, showing a Tibetan's compassion for nature and all beings. He asked back: "The flames are like mountain peaks and snow-capped mountains. Is this really what we want?" This all-round, three-dimensional thinking and multiple responses presented by Tibetan contemporary art respond to social issues that are universally concerned by the world.

Even so, the diversity of artworks in Tibet is very limited. Due to the limitations of the use of traditional materials, it seems that most of them only use traditional painting techniques and painting materials to display modern art at this stage. The connotation of traditional art is still difficult to change and insurmountable, and the audience's ability to accept it is low. As a result, the output of diverse works of art is still less.

## 2.3 Tibetan Contemporary Art and Social Responsibility

As for the "real artist", Leo Leoni believes that a real artist is not only about skills (hands-on painting), this form is not a piece of work on paper, but a sense of mission deep in the artist's heart [7]. For Tibetan artists, their cultural background makes them inherently shoulder a heavier responsibility than artists from other regions.

Although contemporary art often challenges and subverts tradition. But good works make people focus on their own work, pay attention to society and take social responsibility. In these years of contemporary development, there have also been some testing of boundaries, transgression of conventions and ethical challenges. Tibetan contemporary art is no exception. GaDe is the leader of the Tibetan contemporary artist group, a member of the National Art Association of China. He is also a director of the Tibetan Artists Association, one of the founders of the Gedun Chompel Art Space, and the most representative and creative artist in Tibet. Many of his works show his awareness of cultural responsibility. For GaDe, documenting the present is an act of cultural responsibility, and his work breaks away from the original concept of Buddhism. Just using materials, forms and compositions from traditional Tibetan Buddhist traditions to make artworks "look like Tibetans." For example, the most famous "Pecha Nagpo" in Gade's "Pecha Sarpa" (2005~2009), is a work that uses almost exclusively traditional Tibetan materials and is inspired by the esoteric diagrams and visionary

experiences depicted in secret autobiography [8]. In Gadé's painting, the visual approach turns on ideological symbols of the Communist Party such as the hammer and sickle, an American dollar symbol, the Muslim star and crescent, the yungdrung (yung drung), a Bön and Buddhist symbol of auspicious-ness, and the Christian cross. Three types of 'text' appear: quotes from Buddhist scripture in Tibetan written in gold, graffiti-style names of rock bands in English, and a humorous imitation of an erudite form of Tibetan religious poetry [9]. Symbols of globalization take the work beyond mystical forms as social change and globalization transcend religious universals. GaDe said that, in tantra, shapes and symbols carried meanings correlating to the elements and so forth. But that is not his intention here. What's more, he said, the audience can see the connection to Tibetan culture immediately, but looking closer or with deeper thought, no one can say what the symbols mean. This is the state of many people's relationship to Tibetan culture today, they don't know deeply. It can be seen that GaDe's awareness of cultural responsibility shows that it makes Tibetan cultural symbols closer to the public through Chinese methods. But the artwork, while beautiful and interesting, ultimately lacks expertise and spiritual significance [10]. This work is even called "dikp chenpo" in the Tibetan artist community, which is a big sin. According to religious conservatives for three reasons, firstly, he violated the traditional prohibition of authorizing the viewing of tantra. Second, he reproduced the portrait without the permission of the religious authority. Third, in the reproduction process, he also extensively modified the portrait, expressing his views in the form of scriptures of the highest religious authority [11]. Although GaDe stated that he never intended to create a religious work, the similarity is enough to make the audience feel uneasy, and the wrong image may cause harm to human society. And this kind of work that lacks spiritual meaning can be called without "content", which is beyond ethics and conventions. From a contemporary artist's worldview, freedom to have the right to creative self-expression without fully considering responsibility is meaningless. Of course, in the artist's career, with the production and exhibition of works, there will inevitably be criticisms and problems, but GaDe's contribution to Tibetan art is even more profound. His work "Ice Buddha" has become a milestone in Tibetan art contemporary art.

### 3. Suggestion

First of all, for openness, the change of "habit" can be uncomfortable, and the throes of change are even more misunderstood, but this makes the creative fruits of contemporary challenges to "habit" all the more precious. In this regard, Tibetans should try to use a more open and inclusive attitude and respect its spirit of exploration, because these "differences" may be necessary for social progress and improvement. For Tibet, this is more conducive to the sustainable development of culture. As GaDe asks the audience a question: "Does tradition, or, for that matter, modernity, reside in the forms, content or use of material objects?" This undoubtedly caused Tibetans to think.

Secondly, Tibetan art groups are gradually responding to global topics with diversified artistic creations, paying attention to social issues and assuming a part of their social responsibilities. They participate in social management in the form of art, arouse the truth and goodness in people's hearts, and use art to speak for life. The background of Buddhist culture makes Tibetans generally kind and compassionate. Therefore, this is the advantage of Tibetan artists, who pay attention to social issues with compassion and use this as inspiration to remind the world, which is the embodiment of the artist's social responsibility.

Third, the social responsibility for Tibetan art, the exploration of boundaries, transgression and ethical provocation are the problems of contemporary art as well as the problems of Tibetan contemporary art. In the search for inspiration and theme creation, even excellent artists will make mistakes, even if the original intention is to pursue art away from religion to re-record culture in the color of the public, and to make culture more sustainable. However, this kind of work that has no meaning, no content, and goes beyond the norm and violates traditional prohibition is not recognized. For Tibetans, such works would cause even greater national anger and unease. Tibetan artists have originally shouldered heavier responsibilities because of their cultural and historical background, so

it is more important not to cause more pain and anxiety to Tibetan audiences and to assume necessary social responsibilities.

#### 4. Conclusion

In general, there are two factors that can make Tibetan contemporary art develop well. On the one hand, Tibetans should treat contemporary artworks with more respect and tolerance. Understand the expression and aesthetic methods of contemporary art. In this way, the works created by the artists will be more diverse, and the development of Tibetan art will be accelerated accordingly. At the same time, it is also necessary to promote social progress and improve society. On the other hand, contemporary Tibetan artists should take social responsibility while creating freely. Tibetan society is free and pure, but it is also traditional, and it has many cultural connotations that cannot be easily modified. In this regard, the artist should grasp the degree of creation, use the correct image, and think about the connotation behind it. This is a sense of being responsible for work and society and does not give the Tibetan people more pain and anxiety. Tibetan people accept artists with a more inclusive attitude and respect their works. Tibetan artists create works with content with a higher sense of responsibility. It is believed that under the interaction of the two, Tibetan contemporary art will develop in a better manner.

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