

Robert Beer



PADMAPANI AVALOKITESHVARA, Siddhimuni and Surendra Man Shakya (1998), about 55 x 40 cm, mineral pigments on cotton

For almost three decades, Robert Beer has been studying Buddhism and *thangka* painting with some of the finest lama artists in India and Nepal. His knowledge of this culture, painting, and religion has made him one of the leading authorities on Buddhist paintings and Buddhist symbolism. He is also committed to helping create a better and deeper understanding of the meaning and symbolism of *thangka* paintings in the West. Following the publication of his acclaimed books *The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, and *The Handbook of Buddhist Symbols*, part of Robert Beer's collection of *thangka* paintings of Newar (Nepali) artists is on view at Tibet House in New York until the end of March. In the following interview with Olivia Sand, he discusses his collection and the path that led him to specialise in Buddhist studies.

Asian Art Newspaper: The pieces in the exhibition at Tibet House are all part of your collection. When did you actually start collecting works from the Newar artists?

Robert Beer: I started collecting about 10 years ago. It was not until then that I actually had the money to begin buying and commissioning work from the Newar painters. Presently, there are approximately 120 pieces in the collection of which, I think, about 80 are included in the exhibition at Tibet House. The Newars are definitely the primary focus of the collection.

AAN: Considering the time you have been following the Newar artists, do you find that the movement has changed or evolved?

RB: It has certainly become much more professional with a lot of individual artists developing great skills. Unfortunately, too often these artists are bound by the dealers, who try to keep the prices down for the tourist market. Nevertheless, there are a few individual artists who have escaped that problem and have chosen to concentrate on becoming artists in their own right by devoting a large amount of time to the production of their paintings. Today, there are somewhere between 5-10,000 artists working in the Kathmandu Valley, with approximately 20 artists that are producing extremely good work. It is essentially their work I have been collecting and commissioning. However, I do not consider myself a collector as such. I am also an artist, so I understand how long these pieces take to paint and appreciate the meticulous detail and the skill involved in producing this type of painting. They are just such wonder-

continued on page 4



VASHUDHARA, Siddhimuni and Surendra Man Shakya (1988-96), 67.5 x 52.5 cm, mineral pigments on cotton

ful pieces that I have mainly bought them with the idea to make a book on the whole evolution of modern Newar art, to make cards and prints so that other people can see and enjoy these works, too.

AAN: Is the exhibition at Tibet House scheduled to travel?

RB: At the moment, it is not scheduled to travel within the United States. In April, it is going to travel within England – at the Museum of East Asian Art in Bath and then to the Oriental Museum, which is part of Durham University. The exhibitions will be a smaller version than the one in New York, because of space restrictions. The Tibet House gallery is quite a large gallery.

AAN: Were you familiar with the history, the culture, and the religion of Nepal and India before your first visit?

RB: I was already quite interested in Buddhism when I was still living in England. Since I was about sixteen or seventeen, I have been interested in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions. I was twenty when, in 1970, I went to India for the first time. I lived there for six years – five years in India and one year in Nepal. I had already started to paint before I went to India and I was also very interested in the art and music of India. Therefore, I decided to study both Tibetan art and Indian music during my first stay. Back then, there were actually very few modern Tibetan paintings. Most of the artists had come out of Tibet in exile, only 10 or 11 years after 1959, and a lot of these artists were actually working on road crews, breaking stones which was the only way Tibetans could earn a living. So there were very few people carrying on the tradition at that time.

AAN: What sparked your interest in the Orient, in Indian, Nepali and Tibetan culture, religion, and art in the first place?

RB: Basically, a need to find meaning. That happened to me when I was very young

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because my sister died when I was fourteen. I had this experience after she died, and I knew that death was not the end, that something survives. At a very early age that became the most important thing in my life, trying to understand what life was really about. Buddhism and Hinduism were worthy sources of discovering that.

AAN: Does learning the history and the technique go hand in hand?

RB: No, it does not. I basically learnt the technique of how the deities are drawn, because they are drawn on mathematical grids called *thig-tsa*, which are constructed in systems of measurements. So essentially, I was learning how to draw the deities and their colours. For a large part of my life I have discovered and have been trying to understand the symbolism, which I eventually began to interpret from my personal understanding of Buddhism. The language of course was a great barrier. At that time, a lot of Tibetans did not speak English, and I have always been very poor at their language.

AAN: Does Tibetan thangka painting allow for a certain artistic freedom in the way deities are presented, or on the contrary, is the artist expected to comply with a complex set of rules?

RB: Actually, it is strictly prescribed. The deity has to be in a certain colour, in a certain posture, with a certain number of heads that

again have to be in a certain colour, etc. Everything is very prescribed, and it is the same with the composition. A composition of deities is pretty much prescribed, but at the same time, there is a great amount of freedom within that seemingly rigid structure. It is similar to Indian music, which is a very good example for comparison, because in Indian *ragas*, there are ascending and descending notes on a scale. However, within that, a huge degree of improvisation is allowed. To somebody that does not understand Indian music, it may sound very much the same. A raga can be expressed in completely different and rich and complex ways. Within a very crude painting or an incredibly refined painting of the same deity, there can be a huge amount of flexibility. There can be quite a lot of freedom in what appears to be a very strict structure.

AAN: Considering Buddhist painting from Nepal, India, and Tibet, would you say that any one style is more rigid than another in its discipline?

RB: Tibetan painting is probably the most rigid. The Newars originally were the artists that created most of the Tibetan art in Central Tibet. A lot of Newar artists came from Nepal and were commissioned to create wall paintings. They were extremely innovative in the way that they expressed things at that time. The Newars introduced many different stylistic influences into the art of Tibet. At the same time, one needs to realise that Newar Buddhism is different from that practised in Tibet: there are deities that are far more popular in Nepal and found quite rarely in Tibet, as there are many figures in Tibet that do not really appear in the Newar tradition. So they do have these distinct traditions. Nepal has three art cities: Kathmandu, the city of art and painting; Patan, the city of bronze casting; and Bhaktapur, the city for wood carving. There was an exodus of artists from these three cities to Tibet, which explains why a lot of Tibetan artists based their skills on the Newars.

AAN: With the Dalai Lama leaving Tibet, many Tibetan refugees fled to Nepal. Now there are more Tibetan artists coming from Tibet into Nepal to continue their careers. Is this artistic knowledge being passed on?

RB: More and more young people are going to Nepal because it has become much easier to travel. In the 1970s, there were very few practising Tibetan artists because they had to earn their living in some other way. Also, there really was not an interest in Tibetan art as such in the Western world, except for antiques with a provenance and some commercial value. Anything modern was not something that would have been commissioned by Westerners at that time. However, in the West in recent years, there is increasing interest in Tibetan Buddhism, which has spread all over the world. A lot of work is now commissioned from Nepal, especially in the field of bronze casting. The Newars are famous for the bronze casting and it has a strong and long tradition in their art – it remains very much a Newar tradition today. Tibetans, who established monasteries in India, Nepal or in the West, would commission bronze statues from the city of Patan in the Kathmandu Valley.

AAN: In retrospect, it seems as if you were ahead of your time, studying thangka painting and living in India and Nepal as early as 1970. To what would you attribute today's broad interest in Oriental art, religion (especially Buddhism) and culture?

RB: Let us first take the example of Egyptian art. Egyptian art is complex because we do not really understand the cultural context. Therefore, we can only speculate what ancient Egypt was like. One does not have that situation with Tibetan art because Tibet had a continuous history and civilisation until the Chinese went into Tibet and then Tibetans brought their art and civilisation with them

continued on page 6



CHINTAMANI LOKESHVARA, Siddhimuni and Surendra Man Sakya, 1988-1996,
27 x 21 in., mineral pigments on cotton



HEVAJRA, Uday and Dinesh Shrestha (1991-1997), about 84 x 65 cm, gouache on cotton

*'I think this symbolism is probably one of the most
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into that exile. It is possible to understand what the objects are, what the paintings are, and that they all have a huge world of meaning behind them. When one begins to penetrate that world, it is fascinating. I think this symbolism is probably one of the most fascinating elements about their art as the meaning is endless. One can continue to study – and the more one studies, the more sense it makes.

AAN: Since 1959, has a lot of the knowledge been lost?

RB: A lot of the knowledge was lost when the Chinese arrived. For a lot of the old painters, either they came out into exile or, if they stayed in Tibet, they could not continue with their work. Their knowledge was not valid, certainly not in Tibet once the Chinese ruled and controlled the situation. Their knowledge died out with them, and there are very few of these old artists left. In Nepal, they would rely much more on sketchbooks, on actual drawings that were made either in Tibet or in Nepal – this visual information would then be passed on from father to son.

AAN: Through your books, you have covered considerable ground in terms of Buddhist symbolism. Is the latest book the most comprehensive one?

RB: There is *The Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* that I wrote and recently we published the *The Handbook of Buddhist Symbols* in order to make the information more user-friendly. Both of these books are only on the attributes of the deities and not actually on the symbolism of the deities themselves. They are basically preludes to work that I would like to do on the actual deities themselves, describing the symbolism of the deities. So there is a lot more work on symbolism that I need and would like to do and that other people also will do. In regards

to the attributes, these two books should cover the most important symbols of Buddhism.

AAN: Would you say that *thangka* paintings are valued in the West the way they should be valued and understood?

RB: No, not really. To begin with, there are very few people who know of these artists, for example, Siddhimuni, who died two years ago. He was the greatest artist of the 20th century in Nepal, and according to many Newars, he was the greatest artist who ever lived in Nepal. His work is rarely known, most of his early work was done for the temples in Nepal, and after that when he started selling privately, his work went to a few Japanese, German or American collectors. It is not only very difficult to obtain his work, but it is also phenomenally expensive to buy these pieces. Some of the pieces in the show at Tibet House represent six months work, another up to two years work.

AAN: Do you have any major competitors collecting Newar artists?

RB: There are a few people in Japan, in Europe, and in the United States that collect similar work, especially that of Siddhimuni. However, for a lot of people collecting Tibetan art, the date seems to stop in 1899. Everything after that is considered 'modern', '20th century'. Anything before that is considered worthy of 'exhibition'.

CONTACT DETAILS

Masterworks of Newar Art, Paintings from the Collection of Robert Beer, remains on view at Tibet House Gallery, 22 West 15th Street, New York, to 31 March. Robert Beer will explain the art styles and iconography of the works on the evenings of 25 and 26 March. For information, www.tibethouse.org, tel. 212 807 0563.