

Deborah Klimburg-Salter

Reflections on a Year at the Wissenschaftskolleg



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Between the time I wrote my ideal project for the Wissenschaftskolleg and my actual arrival, many things had changed. Thus, five articles were written or finished, two books were folded into one and yet a third and fourth (edited volume) were conceived.

Two of these articles have appeared, “The Question of Style in Tibetan Art” in *Tibet Journal* (35, 4 [2000]: 83–90) and “Dung dkar/

Phyi dbang, West Tibet, and the Influence of Tangut Buddhist Art” in *East and West* (51, 1 [2000]: 1–26). The three other articles deal with the art of little known Buddhist monuments in the Indian Himalayas. The editorial work on a co-edited volume on later Mahayana Art of India and Tibet resulting from a panel I had jointly organized for the tri-annual meeting of the International Association of Tibetan Studies and on the Tucci Tibetan art catalogue filled in the gaps in creativity.

In November I dedicated three weeks to field research in Central Tibet. Initially a much longer research trip had been planned for summer 2000 together with Professor Christina Scherrer-Schaub, École pratique des hautes études Paris and University of Lausanne. I chose to concentrate only on those monuments relating to the two topics that I was currently working on at the Wissenschaftskolleg: the Tucci Tibetan Collections at the National Museum of Oriental Art in Rome and Buddhist narrative painting.

As I observed the pilgrims and local inhabitants, it became clear to me that narrative art played an important role in their ritual activity. The Tantric images that are more popular in Western collections are used only on restricted occasions. The most dramatic of the paintings, associated with Tantric literature and practise such as Mandalas, are used only by Tantric practitioners.

Thus, instead of a monograph, narrative art became a chapter in the book on Tibetan Art and the Tucci Collections. And I agreed to introduce and co-edit the results of a workshop held at the Wissenschaftskolleg on narratives (see below), undoubtedly a far more interesting work than I could have produced alone.

In December, thanks to the assistance of the Wissenschaftskolleg, I was able to invite three collaborators to a working group on the Tucci catalogue. This was possible by combining the travel funds from the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) and the hospitality offered by the Wissenschaftskolleg. Over a period of ten days, we were able to finalize the organization of the collection. It will seem absurd to a Western art historian that this process occurred only at the end of our studies. The simple reason is that the field of Tibetan art history is in its infancy. There are so few firmly dated Tibetan portable paintings that until now the chronology of Tibetan art has been largely a matter of subjective judgement and intuition.

The paintings of the Tucci Collections will be organized primarily iconographically and only secondarily chronologically. The goal of the “framework” of iconographic forms is to allow a Western audience a better understanding of the meaning, function, and identity of

the vast pantheon of Tibetan images. This “framework” has been adapted from Tibetan traditional sources (*The Three Roots; lama-yidam – chos skyong*). This research agenda began about 15 years ago when I took over responsibility for publishing the Tucci Collections.

Then a political trauma in Asia disrupted the life of a Wissenschaftskolleg Fellow in Berlin. The Taliban, in my old home Afghanistan, decided to broadcast their ideology on an international scale by blowing up the largest Buddhas on earth. Thus, from February 26, 2001, the day of the pronouncements of their intentions, I found myself locked in intense e-mail comradeship with former friends and colleagues as well as previously unknown people desperately trying to find ways to save the Bamiyan Buddhas. I was joined in my concerns and efforts here in the Wissenschaftskolleg by Mohamed Hashim Kamali and his wife Susannah Tan. We, or at least I, had hoped that Hashim’s reasoned stand as a Muslim jurist might have some impact on his fellow Afghans.

These events have focused attention on the problem of international responsibility for the protection of cultural treasures. Despite the disaster in Afghanistan, it is still my belief that the ultimate goal should be to protect these national treasures until they can be repatriated. My article in *Orientalism* (32, 4 [April 2001]) and the letters that were published with it demonstrate the various sides to this discourse.

The same process that eventually destroyed the remaining pre-Islamic art in Afghanistan has brought an enormous amount of new material – manuscripts, coins, and art objects – to the international antiquities market. As a result, the picture of the cultural history of Afghanistan has expanded enormously since 1989, when I published my study, *The Kingdom of Bamiyan*. The abstract for a new book on the Buddhist Complex in the Bamiyan Valley was completed by June. The paintings, sculptures, and archaeological remains tell the story of a complex culture – the product of an Indian religion under Iranian cultural influence but politically tied to Turkic chiefdoms ruling from Central Asia.

June brought me back to narrative art. With the generous support of the Otto und Martha Fischbeck-Stiftung, I was able to convene a workshop on sacred biography and the visual text. For me, this workshop and the chance to talk intensively with six distinguished colleagues over a period of a week was the true luxury of my experience in the Wissenschaftskolleg. Where else could I meet with six colleagues chosen according to no criteria other than my wish to

exchange ideas with them and to be provided with both privacy for deliberation and gracious hospitality. The multi-disciplinary discourse was much enriched by former and present Fellows at the Kolleg, who allowed us to explore the unexpected dimensions of the experience of religious narrative in pre-modern, non-industrialized societies. Some remarks about this workshop will be found in the third section of this volume.

As for life in Berlin – I enjoyed a previously unknown academic world through colloquia and conversations with my colleagues (if not “through the ears of a bat”). At the first glimpse of sun, we (the colleagues, not the bats) took off for the Grunewald or explored the western suburbs thanks to Riedelsche Fahrräder. The impressive skills of the truly marvellous library staff (Thank You Ms. Bottomley!!!!) brought the part of Berlin I most needed right into my small living-room office. I was too often overwhelmed by the dreadful weather and sprawling city and thus frequently lost opportunities to acquaint myself with the impressive academic life of Berlin. Even more delightful than were the opportunities to enjoy a varied menu of Berlin musical delights with various Wiko friends (facilitated of course by Barbara Sanders). By the time the weather improved (somewhat), activities at the Kolleg had expanded to fill all the available space. I will also undoubtedly regret that I made no excursions in Germany (not even to Dresden!!) except for the stimulating visits to the Universität Hamburg (Asien-Afrika Institut). On the other hand, I was grateful that, in attempting to follow the Wissenschaftskolleg guidelines, I limited my guest lectures to those institutions and topics related to my research here. Thus, in Germany, the Freie Universität Berlin, the Universität Hamburg, the Museum für Indische Kunst, for as we all know, the true blessing of the Kolleg is – time!! to think, perchance to dream ...

Essential to this process were the collaborative exchanges with my working group at the beginning and with the participants in the Workshop at the end of my stay. I am most grateful for this generous support, which extended far beyond the financial. Frau von Arnim never seemed to run out of patience or inspiration, even when I despaired; and Frau Friedrich transformed our tedious tasks with her unflinching humour and efficiency – it is difficult to imagine life here without them!!

I most certainly never have had the privilege of learning about such a wide variety of subjects from so many congenial people. I was impressed most of all with the lectures by the Fellows in the natural sciences. I am sure in the annals of the Wissenschaftskolleg this will

be known as the “Year of the Bat”. And since the bat is the sign of luck in China, I can only hope this bodes well for all of us.