The Early History of Contemporary Art in Bhutan

Jason Hopper

Abstract

Bhutan today hosts a small but vibrant contemporary art scene centred in Thimphu and Paro. During my fieldwork in 2017, I counted no fewer than six galleries in Thimphu and another two in Paro showing contemporary art, not to mention the hotels and cafes that frequently display art by contemporary artists. All of this art presents a mystery: in the absence of the institutions commonly associated with contemporary art such as art schools, national galleries, and museums, how did contemporary art arise in Bhutan? Based on the life histories of artists and archival work at *Kuensel*, I argue that contemporary art grew out of increased exposure to modern artistic practice, increased demand for new forms of visual culture, and a shift in the social organization of traditional artistic practice. Contemporary art, in this way, sheds light on how cultural modernity works in a country focused on cultural preservation.

Introduction

In many ways, art history in Bhutan is unlike its regional neighbours. Whereas modern art was often a key component in the creation of national modernity in countries like India, Thailand, and Japan, Bhutan has never pursued a project of cultural modernity through art. Instead, the Bhutanese state has largely sought to keep culture largely separate from the larger projects of modernization. For example, although Bhutan has pursued bureaucratic and technological modernity in the forms of a modern public education system, modern military structures, new forms of mass communication, and a modern transportation system, cultural policy has focused on preservation and limiting change or outside influence. Consequently, contemporary art in Bhutan has been ad hoc, improvised, something that has grown in the interstices of broader, primarily state-led projects of modernization.

Yet, modern cultural forms have taken root in Bhutan nonetheless. In the following essay, I trace some of the early developments that contributed to the rise of art and, in the process, hope to show how contemporary art can shed light on the dynamics of cultural modernity in Bhutan more generally. Working backwards from my interviews with contemporary artists in Bhutan, I describe some of the key players and show the ways in which their highly personal choices to pursue art were also shaped by broader changes that took place in Bhutan. While by no means the complete story, this paper shows some of the ways cultural modernity in the form of contemporary art developed in Bhutan. Specifically, I argue that a combination of exposure to

new forms of cultural production, demand for new forms of cultural production, and training of artisans for employment by the market and state led to the introduction of contemporary art.

Definition of terms

Allow me to clarify the meaning of a few key terms I use in this essay. Throughout this essay "traditional art" and "contemporary art" refer primarily to modes of making art. Painting is by far the most commonly found contemporary art form, but artists do not confine themselves to one form alone. Contemporary artists like Pema Tshering who primarily paint also engage in other media, such as sculpture, but see all of it as part of their art practice. The fluidity I saw in practice has led me to a relatively loose use of the term "contemporary art" here as I found that the specific medium was often less important than the intention behind the work and the cultural frame people used to approach visual and material culture.

Specifically, I distinguish "contemporary art" as set of ideas and practices that prioritize originality and distinct individual style, and which frame the objects that result from this process as made for aesthetic and conceptual appreciation in their own right. I use the term contemporary art very broadly here, roughly synonymously with the quintessentially modern practices and products other scholars have described as "fine art" (Shiner, 2001). Though this may be confusing for readers familiar with contemporary art as a specific period of global high art, contemporary art is a clearer term for understanding Bhutan. Not only is contemporary the term preferred by artists in Bhutan, but also Bhutan at one point had a National Fine Art Centre which taught traditional, primarily Buddhist, art.

I also specifically wish to distinguish contemporary art from "traditional art" which I use to largely refer to the culture surrounding Buddhist arts, such as painting and statue making, which have been codified as "traditional" in Bhutan. As such, I use the terms traditional and contemporary art to mark, broadly, a distinction between contemporary art as a relatively autonomous realm of experience distinct from the religious experience associated with traditional Buddhist arts. As a result of my focus, the specifics of my argument may or may not apply to other arts in Bhutan. For example, even as some of the dynamics related to modernization described in this essay may apply to fashion and film, these creative practices have their own histories.

Exposure

Although never truly isolated (Pommaret, 2000), Bhutan's relationship to the world beyond its borders intensified and broadened after the 1950s, introducing Bhutanese to new forms of artistic production. Modernization brought more outsiders into the country to aid in

development. Likewise, as Bhutan joined regional and international organizations like the UN (in 1971) and Non-aligned movement (in 1968), more of the elite class had reason and opportunity to travel. This movement of people has played an important role in the arts. Visiting foreigners opened galleries, provided training for aspiring Bhutanese artists, and shared their own ideas about art. Likewise, the introduction of tourism in 1974 created a market and further lead to the rise of tourist hotels that have been central to creating display spaces for contemporary art. Although there is increasingly a Bhutanese market for art, many of the gallery owners continue to insist that without tourism, their sales would collapse.

Some of Bhutan's earliest contemporary artists were members of the elite who had the opportunity to travel abroad. One of the earliest examples come from a man known by his title Dasho Drupon[1], half-brother of the Second Queens of Bhutan. By the early 1970s, Dasho Drupon began producing realistic paintings of people, landscapes, and buildings. In interviews with his family as well as those who knew of him, I heard Dasho Drupon described as ceaselessly creative and also a bit mischievous. Not only did he paint, but he was also an excellent *dranyen* player and led musicians from the court of the Third King of Bhutan to record their music in Kolkata in 1968. Dasho Drupon also traveled to Hong Kong, a popular destination for Bhutanese at the time, and drew inspiration from Chinese paintings of nature. The paintings of his that were kindly shown to me by his surviving family, were done in oil paint and incorporated the distinctive gnarled pine and black-necked cranes against a plain background seen in Chinese art. Another key early painter who had opportunity to travel abroad was Aum Tshokye, the wife of former Foreign Minister Lyonpo Dago Tshering who I was told displayed oil paintings of both landscapes and Buddhist icons. Notably both Dasho Drupon's and Aum Tshokye's work focused on themes that would have been immediately legible as important subject to a Bhutanese audience: the King, religious monuments, and Buddhist icons and symbols. Much contemporary art today continues to play with these themes pioneered by early artists.

Visitors to Bhutan also played an important role. Opened in 1968, India's embassy in Thimphu proved to be an important avenue for the introduction of contemporary art in Bhutan. In particular, the wives of several ambassadors played important roles in the arts in Thimphu. Notably two were ceramic artists. Gouri Khosla, wife of Shri I.P. Khosla (ambassador 1974-77), brought an electric wheel, kiln, and a passion for glazes when she was transferred from England to Bhutan with her husband. Linked to the Tagore family on her mother's side, Gouri

[1] I am using the spelling I have found in *Kuensel* (Zangmo, 2016) and Music of Bhutan Research Centre (2015) publications which is roughly phonetic.

Khosla studied glazes at Taggs Yard School of Ceramics in London (Khosla, 1980). The Third Queen, Ashi Kesang, and the Fourth King's sister Ashi Pem Pem, provided the impetus to start the ceramic gallery in 1975 after they saw Gouri Khosla's works at the embassy (Kuensel, 1976). They brought artists from the National Fine Art center, actually a center for traditional art training under the direction of the Kikhor Lopen, to learn from Mrs. Khosla. As part of the studio, both an electric and wood fired kiln were built and a gallery called Joongshee, set up. Using electric wheels, the traditional sculptors learned to make cups and bowls, as well as porcelain Buddhist deities (Khosla, 1980). They also learned modern glazing and firing techniques that were not part of Bhutanese traditional ceramics. Traditional Bhutanese pottery for utilitarian items is fired on an open flame whereas clay statues are normally just left for sun drying. Notably, Mrs. Khosla also taught the traditional artists about Western Renaissance painters and the "old masters" (Khosla, 1980). In the 1980s, Kusum Haider, the wife of then ambassador Salman Haider, would use the kiln at India house to make beautiful earthenware that played with Bhutanese designs and were sold. A trained actress, Kusum Haider also put on plays in Thimphu, including a rendition of "Black Comedy" and a theatrical version of Rashomon, both with Bhutanese actors.

Education also played an important role in introducing Bhutanese to modern ideas of art. In particular, contemporary art in Bhutan can be traced to Yangchenphug Central School in the mid-1970s. Two key educators at Yangchenphug Central School, Principal J.B. Tyson and art teacher Naresh Sengupta, profoundly influenced the development of new art forms in Bhutan. Opened in 1965 as Thimphu Public School and today known as Yangchenphug Higher Secondary School, Yangchenphug was one of the preeminent educational institutions in Bhutan at the time and a place where many ministers and important people in Bhutan today received primary and secondary education. Both the founder of VAST, "Asha" Kama Wangdi and contributor to Bhutan's first feature film and Paro-based artist Chimi Dorji were students at Yangchenphug. Kama Wangdi and Chimi Dorji formed close bonds with J.B. Tyson and Naresh Sengupta and both credit the two with encouraging their interest in the arts and eventual career as artists. Beyond professional artists, many other Bhutanese of the same generation that I spoke to fondly remembered both J.B. Tyson and Naresh Sengupta and it is likely that their efforts more generally helped foster an audience for new art forms and art education.

Mass media has also played an important role in the introduction of contemporary art to Bhutan. Although today artists largely use the internet to find and learn about art, books were an early form of exposure to artistic practices outside of Bhutan. Dasho Drupon, according to my interviews, relied on books about European painters for inspiration. Well into the 2000s books remained important as the internet was too slow for much more than emails or the simple browsing of websites. Even artists in the late 20s and early 30s described how winning a book about art in a competition was formative for them. VAST, for example, has an extensive library,

and the older members have described how in the past these books were an enthralling and important source of knowledge about art.

Even outside of Thimphu, books were an important introduction to art. One artist who grew up in the south of Bhutan recalled being enamored with a book of Thomas Gainsborough's work—the English portrait and landscape painter. My art classes at VAST were filled with reading recommendations from our teacher as well. Our teacher recommended a huge range of books—fiction about artists like *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and philosophy like *The Seven Rings*—which he said were important for getting us to think and, therefore, were important for making art. Books have never completely disappeared; however, the internet, television, and film have become incredibly important vehicles for new ideas and learning artistic practices. Artists today rely especially on the internet to learn new styles and techniques. During my fieldwork in 2017, for example, many contemporary artists used Youtube to learn how to make Zen Tangles, a trademarked technique for producing graphic patterns, and incorporated these patterns into their work.

Demand

As hinted at above, modernization brought not only contact with new visual culture, but also demand for it. Social change in Bhutan created demand for new forms of visual communication alongside older forms like *mani* walls (Ardussi, 2006). The new visual reforms desired by a changing state and society created conditions where contemporary art and modern artistic skill were valued. Perhaps most directly, the state needed to communicate its development plans, and to gather and produce information such as maps. This led to the need for print-makers, photographers, filmmakers, among others, many of whom were or went on to become artists. Modern schools, likewise, provided spaces where various forms of visual art were considered useful, laudable, and valuable. Likewise, the growth of *Kuensel* from a bi-weekly government newsletter to a daily newspaper of record required not just reporters, but visual media like photographs and comics to fill its pages. So too, hotels also created an important space for the early display of artwork.

Development also created requirements for new media. During the 1980s the state began what is described as a "decentralization" of power that delegated power to regional offices (Ura, 2004). The shift was significant and raised the issue of both communicating the aims of development more broadly and recruiting the populace to the ends of development. Out of these drives, and with the help of the UN, Bhutan created the Development Support Communication Division (DSCD), in 1981 under the Ministry of Communication. The DSCD employed many early artists and gave them a chance to use their skills (if not always as they had hoped to). Kama Wangdi worked for this department and helped make charts, banners and

other materials for many departments. The DSCD also employed filmmakers to document Bhutanese life, including Ugyen Wangdi who would go on to make Bhutan's first feature film. Notably, it was from the DSCD that Kama Wangdi left to study Communication Media at the Kent Institute of Art and Design and it was to the DSCD that Kama Wangdi returned to work before he went on to set up his own art gallery.

Modern schooling, in addition to introducing many Bhutanese to art, also created demand for new forms of artistic production and showed that art in a modern sense was something valuable. While only a few schools have offered art classes, like YHS did in the 1970s, many have art clubs. Sherubtse College art club, in particular, was important to the practice of Sukbir Biswas, who owns Art Yantra Gallery in Thimphu where he sells his own and the artwork of many other people. The art club produced works to sell at the colleges "Fete Day" which in turn raised money for buying art supplies. The teachers often bought the artwork, providing both a source of approval to the students and funds for their painting. The Paro College of Education (PCE) art club has also fostered artists. The Tashigyangtse extension of VAST was started by Jigme Tenzin, who not only learned art at VAST but also was an active member of the PCE art club. Tshewang Darjey, a dzongkhag teacher north of Thimphu, also was an active participant in the teacher college's art club. Another artist displaying his work in the galleries in Thimphu was an active member in the art club at Samtse College of Education and contributed to an annual exhibition they had there in addition to selling his artwork in Thimphu. Teachers, it should be noted, learn "visual communication", but schools do not currently offer art classes.

Furthermore, schools continue to be the key way youths find out about and participate in art competitions run through everything from UNICEF to VAST, sometimes in coordination. The earliest records of art competitions I could find in Bhutan were sponsored by India. In 1972, Chimi Dorji[2] won a competition through India house and the following year *Kuensel* announced he won an award from Shankar's International Children's Competition (SICC). Started with support from cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai's publication Shankar's Weekly, SICC began in 1949 and accepted international submissions the following year. The competition carried some prestige with it, *Kuensel* records that Indira Gandhi herself handed out Chimi Dorji's award and the award was accepted by Lyonpo Pema Wangchuck, Bhutan's representative to India. Notably Chimi Dorji did go on to become an artist, working on Bhutan's first feature film released in 1988 and opening his own gallery in Paro that sold modern art from 2005 until 2013 or 2014. Competitions supported by NGOs like UNICEF or WWF and run through schools continue to provide encouragement for Bhutanese artists. When I asked about how they

[2] The romanization of Bhutanese names is often inconsistent, so although the newspaper lists "Chimmi" Dorji and also "Chime" Dorji as winning, these are the same artist.

got interested in art, many young artists brought up winning an art competition or having their work printed in the calendars that often result from such competitions.

The development of *Kuensel* from a biweekly into a daily newspaper created a demand not only for written but also visual material that provided a space for artists to display their work and income. In fact, the same Chimi Dorji who won a Shankar's Weekly competition and was a student of Naresh Sengupta also wrote and drew a comic which ran in *Kuensel* weekly from 1987 until 1988—possibly Bhutan's first. The story followed the adventures of Tenzin Drugay "first druk descid [sic]" who became the first head of the civil administration under the Zhabdrung known as "desi" (Chimi, 1987). The story told in the comics emphasized the values of loyalty, bravery, and religious devotion, and drew parallels between the past and the present. Readers must have enjoyed not only the history lesson, but the scenes of intrigue, swordsmanship, and dangerous travel across mountain passes. The comics also linked the past and present in a way that fit with broader projects of nation building at the time, adapting an incredibly modern narrative from to the goal of cultural preservation. Other early artists, such as the architect Namgay Retty who would go on to display art at a gallery set up by volunteers with the British Voluntary Service Overseas in the 1980s, sent in sketches to be displayed in the pages of *Kuensel*.

As mentioned earlier, hotels have also provided one of the earliest and most important markets for contemporary art in Bhutan and spaces for the display of that art. One of the earliest was likely the Druk Hotel. Very few accommodations existed early on in Bhutan, and visitors had to stay in government "guest houses" (Imaeda, 2013). But by the 1980s, hotels were beginning to open. Part of the Bhutanese Tashi Group of Companies, the Druk Hotel opened in 1985. Boutique hotels in Bhutan cater to both foreigners and to Bhutanese elite. They provide not only a place to stay, but also a place to meet and to host events. Early on, the Druk Hotel served as a space for displaying entrants of an RSPN art competition (Kuensel, 1987). Catering to foreigners and to the Bhutanese elite, hotels pursued an aesthetic that looked "modern" and also "Bhutanese". Artists played an active role in helping create the demand for their work in hotel spaces. In particular, Sukbir Biswas helped pioneer the display of contemporary art in these places. He recounts traveling with his paintings, made in his spare time while working at the Ministry of Revenue, to try and convince the owners of the hotel to buy and display his work. Today, works by many contemporary artists can be found in the high-end hotels in Thimphu. Le Meridien, which has a reputation for supporting the arts and creating "art experiences" for its guests, has even donated gallery space to VAST in 2017. Kama Wangdi worked on several large pieces for upcoming hotels during my stay in Thimphu.

Modernization of traditional art training

One of the main contributors to the rise of contemporary art was, paradoxically, the formalization of training in traditional art. Starting with the Institute for Zorig Chusum (IZC) and National Fine Art Centre in the 1970s, the creation of institutes to train Bhutanese in traditional art represented a significant shift in the social position of traditional artists if not in the training itself. To begin, the institutes placed art within the comparatively secular purview of the state. Current scholarship suggests that prior to modernization, traditional art was deeply Buddhist. Monasteries and *dzongs* served as key sites for learning the arts and religious figures played a central role in teaching traditional art (Ardussi, 2008; Maki, 2016).[3] Though Buddhism continues to remain important to the training of traditional artists, Buddhist prayers form an important part of the daily routine of students, the institutes moved from being primarily part of Bhutan's religious institutions to primarily part of the state, managed under the Ministry of Labour. The new institutes also mirrored a broader shift in power towards secular side of the "dual system" of government described by Michael Aris (1979, 1994).

Furthermore, the institutes were part of a broader shift towards modern forms of labor to meet the demands of a state that no longer relied on corvée labor and a burgeoning market. Early in the modernization process Bhutan faced a general shortage of labor for new development projects (Pain, 2004). This also applied to artisans. One of the key figures in the creation of the National Painting School that would eventually turn into the IZC, Dasho Choki Dorji explained in our interview that the need for a training center became evident from the difficulty faced recruiting skilled artisans for work on renovations of Tashichodzong undertaken in the 1960s. The state in Bhutan needed not only civil servants, many of whom were trained at Sherubtse a modern secondary school founded in 1962, but also artisans. Similarly, the National Fine Art Centre, founded by the Ministry of Trade, Industry, and Forests in 1971, was explicitly created to create employment opportunities for the growing tourist market in Bhutan. The Fine Art Centre (which initially taught mask making, the sculpture of religious figures, and thangka painting) was part of a larger Handicraft Emporium that gathered and sold Bhutanese handicrafts. In his address at the opening, L.M. Menezes, hired in the capacity of "Industrial Expert," described the goals of the emporium and the other centers set up by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, as to preserve cultural and artistic heritage while meeting market demand for handicrafts (Kuensel, 1971). In effect, traditional arts organizations created a new class of artisans that operated like free labor or civil servants.

[3] Further research on the social organization of art prior to 1960 could help clarify or complicate the transition I describe. Most extant research focuses on religious figures, mostly likely due to the sources available.

The shift in how traditional art was organized seems to have accompanied traditional artists experimenting with new art forms. A number of important contemporary artists received their training at organizations run and founded by the Bhutanese government. The Fine Arts Centre was where Kama Wangdi–one of the founders of VAST, prolific artist, and hugely influential mentor for many current Bhutanese artists–trained starting in 1976. Kama Wangdi learned not only painting, but a host of other crafts and stayed at the Fine Art Centre for 10 years, helping them develop new products (Samal, 2010). Tshewang Tenzin, Gyembo Wangchuk, and Phurba Namgay either studied and/or taught at the Zorig Chusum. Some of these artists have explicitly told me that in addition to providing greater freedom, their interest in contemporary art reflected a growing market for non-traditional work. Notably, these artists are all men. Buddhist painting and traditional arts institutions were initially only open to men, which likely contributed to the fact that most practicing contemporary artists in Bhutan are men. However, this dynamic may be changing. Recent exhibitions by Zimbiri, who trained in fine art in the United States, and the "Her Expression" exhibitions that have been running at VAST since 2014 are two examples of the increased participation of women in contemporary art.

Conclusion

While by no means complete, the overview provided herein I hope offers a comprehensive view of the early contributing factors to the growth of contemporary art in Bhutan. In particular, I hope this essay points the direction towards future research. Oral history of traditional art before the 1960s, for example, could reveal much about the social organization of art. Likewise, studying contemporary art offers a sense of the dynamics of cultural modernity in a country where cultural policy not only lacks a broad program of cultural modernization but actively seeks to resist cultural modernization. The rise of contemporary art shows the way ordinary Bhutanese founds spaces between official state projects to make room for ad hoc, context specific, what might be considered what Ritu Khanduri calls a "tactical" form of modernity (Khanduri, 2014).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer and Dolma Roder for comments on various drafts of this article. Much of this work is informed by interviews and oral history, and I would also like to thank the people too numerous to list here who took the time to allow me to interview them. Finally, I would like to thank my research assistant Karma Tenzin Choden.

References

Ardussi, J. (2006, 2007). Stone Inscriptions: An Early Written Medium in Bhutan and its Public Uses. Paper presented at the Media and Public Culture: Proceedings of the Second International Seminar on Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, Bhutan.

Arussi, J. (2008). Gyalse Tenzin Rabgye (1638-1696), Artist Ruler of 17th-century Bhutan. In T. T. Bartholomew, J. Johnston, & H. A. o. Arts (Eds.), *The dragon's gift: Sacred arts of Bhutan*: Serindia Publications.

Aris, M. (1979). *Bhutan, the early history of a Himalayan kingdom*. Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips.

Aris M. (1994). The raven crown : the origins of Buddhist monarchy in Bhutan. London: Serindia Publications.

Chimi. (1987, June 13). Introducing Tenzin Drugay. *Kuensel*.

Imaeda, Y. (2013). *Enchanted by Bhutan*. Thimphu, Bhutan: Riyang Books.

Khanduri, R. G. (2014). Caricaturing Culture in India: Cartoons and History in the Modern World: Cambridge University Press.

Khosla, G. (1980). A touch of class. *Eve's Weekly, 34*, 36-42.

Kuensel. (1971, June 16). Handicrafts Emporium Inaugurated. *Kuensel*, pp. 1-2.

Kuensel. (1976). Art Gallery Opened in Thimphu. *Kuensel*, pp. 3-4.

Kuensel. (1987). Society announces winners. *Kuensel*, p. 2.

Maki, A. (2016). *A Visual Transmission of Bhutanese art.* Paper presented at the Vajrayana buddhism in the 21st century.

Music of Bhutan Research Centre. (2015). Songs of the Third King's court: Legendary performances from the first studio recordings of traditional Bhutanese vocal music. Retrieved from http://www.musicofbhutan.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Songs-of-the-Third-Kings-Court-Web.pdf.

Pain, A. (2004). State, Economy and Space in Bhutan in the Early Part of the 19th Century. In K. Ura & S. Kinga (Eds.), *The Spider and the Piglet: Proceedings of the First International Seminar on Bhutan Studies* (pp. 160-193). Thimphu: Centre for Bhutan Studies.

Pommaret, F. (2000). Ancient Trade Partners: Bhutan, Cooch Bihar and Assam (17th-19th Centuries). *Journal of Bhutan Studies*.

Samal, P. (2010). All for the love of art. Retrieved from www.vastbhutan.org.bt

Shiner, L. E. (2001). *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ura, K. (2004). Deities, archers, and planners in the era of decentralisation. Bhutan: Karma Ura.

Zangmo, T. (2016). Zhungdra: Dying voice of the divine. *Kuensel*. Retrieved from http://www.kuenselonline.com/zhungdra-dying-voice-of-the-divine/