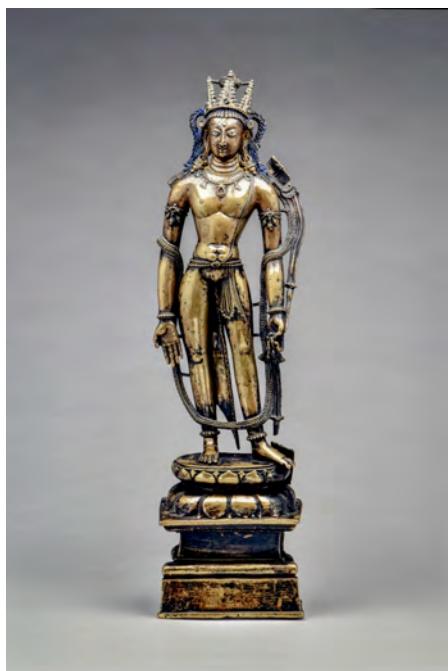


Gentle Glory: Loss, Exile, and Survival in an Eleventh Century Tibetan Bodhisattva

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Fig. 1: Collection: Linden-Museum Stuttgart; Object number: SA 00863 L; Name: 'Jam dpal or Mañjuśrī; Place & Community Details: 11 CE, West Tibet; Maker's Name: unkown; Materials: brass with copper and silver inlay, traces of colour, and fragments of inlaid semi-precious stones. Cast using the lost wax method; Collector: N. G. Ronge; Date of Acquisition by the Museum: 1990.



This text is an attempt to read a Tibetan Buddhist statue from the Linden Museum's collection against the grain of the uneasy category called 'Tibetan art' which has been used to domesticate¹ Tibetan cult objects housed in Western museums, aiming to read this object instead through the prism of (cultural) loss and (cultural) survival.

Close to a thousand years ago, unknown artist/s in West Tibet crafted this majestic brass statue, a 'master piece' in every sense, depicting 'Jam dpal, a Bodhisattva who is also known by his Sanskrit name Manjushri. The name Manjushri (gentle or sweet glory) is short for Manjushrikumarabhuta and refers to a Buddhist deity who takes the form of a young prince (*kumara*). A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being on the cusp of Buddhahood who delays their own spiritual liberation in order to help all sentient beings achieve salvation. Bodhisattvas are moved to make this sacrifice by their boundless compassion. 'Jam dpal is the Bodhisattva of learning and wisdom.

The eleventh century sculptors who created this figure were likely commissioned to do so by an elite patron who wished to accrue religious merit by sponsoring this figure. Once completed, statues of Tibetan Buddhist deities, both large and small, metal or clay, usually undergo a consecration ceremony that transforms them into living beings in the eyes of believers. In this process, hollow statues are filled with sacred texts, relics, amulets, and other consecrated or purifying substances and then sealed. Senior monks subsequently conduct a blessing ceremony inviting the deity to inhabit the figure. For the last four to five hundred years at least, it has also been a tradition to paint the face and neck of a brass figure with a mixture of gold powder and glue and other pigments.² A consecrated statue is usually placed on an altar. Worshippers venerate it by offering bowls of water, lamps, incense sticks, scarves, and food, just as one would a living being. Traditional food offerings include barley flour cakes called *torma*, but chocolates, cookies, and fruit are all lovingly offered. Taking care of a sacred statue by regularly cleaning, repairing, and polishing it as well as renewing the gold paint on its face and neck is also considered an act of worship.

When it entered the museum's collection in 1990, this statue was catalogued as the Bodhisattva Padmapani, an attribution that has recently been corrected.³ The earlier misidentification is not surprising. At the time of acquisition, the figure was missing a crucial part of the original composition that might have helped a curator correctly identify it, namely a water lily bearing a manuscript that the

1 Harris 2012, 71–72.

2 Schroeder 2008, 26–31.

3 The Linden-Museum thanks Dr. Christian Luczanits, Senior Lecturer in Tibetan and Buddhist Art at SOAS, University of London, for correctly identifying the figure through comparisons with other known depictions of Manjushri.

Bodhisattva once held in his left hand (only the stem and some leaves remain today). The main identifying mark of standing depictions of Manjushri, the water lily and manuscript, had disappeared by the time the figure had arrived at the museum, along with other important features such as an aureole that once encircled the whole figure, and many semiprecious stone inlays that once made up its jewels.

If one approaches this Bodhisattva as a living being who was once lovingly cared for by a community, the losses it has since suffered register starkly. They tell of a murky period of displacement that saw this figure move from a West Tibetan monastery or shrine where it was likely worshipped at an altar until around the middle of the twentieth century to a dimly lit museum space where it has stood since 1990. The exact details of this statue's removal from Tibet remain unclear: no provenance information was presented or demanded when it was purchased by the museum from a Tibet-born artist and art dealer who reported that the statue had originated in Tholing in West Tibet and that he himself had purchased it in Nepal.⁴

Though the specific circumstances remain unknown, this Bodhisattva likely followed the same path as a majority of Tibetan 'art objects' that now reside in the West. Many of the earliest Western collections of Tibetan objects date back to expeditions and armed raids in the early twentieth century. However, a much larger number arrived via a predatory international art market in Tibetan antiquities that developed following the Chinese annexation of Tibet. A flood of such objects reached dealers, and subsequently museums and private collections, in the aftermath of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s when monasteries across Tibet were ransacked and destroyed. All too aware of the ravages of the decades before, the Linden Museum at the time of purchase described this Bodhisattva as a 'homeless/displaced (German: *heimatloses*) object' that had been uprooted due to the Chinese occupation of Tibet.⁵

Invisible to a casual observer, the Bodhisattva hides yet another loss sustained during its turbulent journey out of Tibet: much of the consecrated viscera of objects that were once sealed inside it, too, had disappeared by the time it entered the museum. This, along with the other losses, have rendered what was once a living deity into a mere statue – no longer consecrated or alive, no longer complete and inhabited by a deity.

From another point of view, however, one could also see the Bodhisattva as a survivor. In spite of the many losses he has suffered, it is not inconceivable that he could one day be fully restored and re-consecrated for a new community of believers. His survival holds out hope for varied movements led by Tibetans in exile to ensure that Tibetan culture, both religious and secular, will be transmitted to new generations raised outside of Tibet – a process that museums in the West with Tibetan collections

4 Linden Museum: Acquisition files for SA 00863 L (1990–1991). These claims cannot be verified.

5 Linden Museum: Acquisition files for SA 00863 L (1990–1991).

are well-placed to support. Such community initiatives remind museum practitioners of the urgent responsibility we bear to treat objects such as this Bodhisattva as alive in every sense – perhaps most importantly by clearly connecting them in our practice to contemporary transnational Tibetan communities and ongoing cultural and political processes instead of treating them purely as artworks or as relics of a culture and a nation, which, even as it fights for survival, is sometimes presumed dead in the way it is presented in museums.

This Bodhisattva's story of loss, exile, and survival can perhaps also remind us of the responsibilities that museums bear towards all communities in exile, significant chunks of whose material heritage now reside in or are mainly accessible through museum collections. How might we contribute to movements for cultural survival? How might we bear witness to and document a culture as it transforms and adapts to survive in extended exile?

Bibliography

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