

UDC 94(5)

## The history of studying Tibetan art in Russia: from the origins of Russian tibetology to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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### Abstract

The article deals with the history of studying Tibetan art in Russia in the context of the history of tibetology. The author divides studies on Tibetan art into three stages. During the first stage (late 18<sup>th</sup> century – late 19<sup>th</sup> century) Tibetan art was part of a complex object of research of Russian tibetology. Researchers described cultural artefacts as well as ethnographic characteristics. This stage increased knowledge of Tibetan art because the artefacts that were later lost had been described and scientists made the first attempts to interpret Buddhist art. The second stage (end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) was connected with considering Buddhist art to be a self contained object of scientific research. This stage witnessed the description and cataloguing of the object of research, i.e. the iconometry and iconography of Tibetan art. Researchers used collected materials in order to solve problems related to the evolution and interpretation of Tibetan art. The last stage of studying Tibetan art began in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Comprehensive catalogues and directories were created, Tibetan treatises on art and comments on them were translated. Interpretation of pictures, sculptures, architecture was made in the context of the Buddhist culture.

### For citation

Kurasov S.V. (2018) Istoriya issledovaniya iskusstva Tibeta v Rossii: ot nachala russkoi tibetologii do serediny XX veka [The history of studying Tibetan art in Russia: from the origins of Russian tibetology to the middle of the 20th century]. *"Belye pyatna" rossiiskoi i mirovoi istorii* ["White Spots" of the Russian and World History], 8 (6), pp. 10-28.

## Keywords

Russian tibetology, Tibet, art, Tibetan art, studies on Tibetan art.

## Introduction

The history of studying Tibetan art is an integral part of the history of tibetology on the whole (specific kinds of Tibetan fine arts are described in Kurasov (2013). Interconnection between the Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan iconography, conventionalism of the Northern Buddhist art resulted in the fact that tibetologists study the issues of art alongside other matters of Tibetan history, philosophy and linguistics. However, there is a range of specialized works in Tibetan art, which made a great contribution to the description of Tibetan art as a unique cultural phenomenon.

### **Research and expeditions before the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning of the Russian tibetology**

Typical of domestic tibetology were its own peculiar development factors attributed to the research and description of peoples of Russia and adjacent areas connected with Tibetan culture and religion. As a result of the first expeditions sent by Peter I to the Siberia, Russian researchers brought Tibetan materials which enriched the Russian Academy of Sciences created in St. Petersburg. The idea of creating the Asian Academy initiated by G.Ya. Ker (1692-1740), S.S. Uvarov (1786-1855), I.O. Pototskii (1761-1815) [Uvarov, 1811, № 1, 27-52; Uvarov, 1811, № 2, 94-116] became the basis for opening the Oriental studies and Oriental languages departments in the universities in Russia, as well as for carrying out research, namely the research of the history of Buddhism.

Tibetan texts, frescos and sculptures found in 1720 in the destroyed Oirot Ablain Khit Monastery on the Irtysh River became the object of academician G.F. Müller's (1705-1783) studies who translated one page of Tibetan manuscript into Latin, as well as presented Buddhist pictures and drawings of the monastery in his book [Müller, 1747]. Some descriptions of the Buddhist pantheon and iconography of Buddhist deities can be found in P.S. Pallas's (1741-1811) travel descriptions [Pallas, 1773-1788].

The beginning of scientific research of Tibetan culture in Russia is connected with the name of I.J. Schmidt (1779-1847). It is worth mentioning the research of major provisions of Buddhism [Schmidt, 1832, 89-120, 221-262] published by Schmidt, as well as translating and publishing the volume of Jataka tales *Dzanglung* (The Wise and the Stupid) [Dzanglung oder der Weise..., 1843]. Schmidt's studies were continued by A.A. Schiefner (1817-1879), who namely prepared the texts of several sutras of canonic Tibetan literature for publication [Schiefner, 1852, 65-78], as well as studied some plots in the Buddhist literature.

The research of the Buddhist cosmology based on the material of the Northern Buddhist sources in the works by the founder of the scientific Mongol studies O.M. Kovalevskii (1800-1878) [Kovalevskii, 1837, 167] are also worth mentioning. His follower A.M. Pozdnev (1851-1920) published several books dealing among other issues with art: *Studies on the life in Buddhist monasteries and Buddhist clergy in Mongolia in connection with this latter's attitude to people*. [Pozdnev, 1887], translation and comments on *A story about Baaz-bakshi Malo-Derbetskii's walking to the Tibetan land* [Skazanie o khozhdenii ..., 1897]; despite the compilativity of these works, they contained a lot of useful material, the description of artefacts which have not been preserved. [Shastina, 2003; Bembeev, 2004].

Thus, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the tibetology had made its first steps: the first expeditions had been carried out, the study of Tibetan culture as a unique phenomenon had been started. The real golden age of the tibetology in the world, identification of the Tibetan art as a separate area of scientific research occurred in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Research of Tibetan art in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century: approaches to iconography**

During the period of the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century (the 1880s – 1917), the interest to Tibet, which had already increased throughout the whole cultural world, resulted in the increase of interest in Tibetan art. During this period, the studies included the description of the monuments of architecture, pictorial art, sculpture alongside historical and geographical, as well as ethnographic features of this exotic region.

This is when the International Association on Studying Middle and Eastern Asia was established; the publishing series *Bibliotheca Buddhica* was founded, which included the best works of tibetologists from the whole world, including the catalogues of art and description of the artefacts. The materials on Tibetan art and culture were significantly enriched due to the expeditions by P.P. Semenov Tyan-Shanskii, N.M. Przhevalskii, M.V. Pevtsov, G.N. Potanin, G.E. Grum-Grzhymailo, V.A. Obruchev, P.K. Kozlov.

Many artefacts of material culture are characterized in the description of a journey around Tibet by famous researcher of oriental culture G.Ts. Tsybikov [Tsybikov, 1991], who was one of the first foreign researcher who secretly reached Chengguan (Lhasa). Being a dedicated explorer, he visited and describe the major monasteries, made a range of unique photos.

Another successful journey was that of B.B. Baradiin (1878-1939) who visited Labrang Monastery and left a detailed description of the monastery itself, life of its inhabitants, as well as Buddhist

philosophy, part of which was published within Bibliotheca Buddhica series [Baradiin, 1924]. Thus, Baradiin wrote about the religious meaning of art in Tibet: “Sacred *pictures, books and monuments* (caitya) are the three major objects of worship – the symbols of Buddha’s three elements of life: the *body, word and thought*. The Buddhist should regard these objects as symbols, as additional objects aimed at raising religious feelings and emotions in a person” [Ibid, 3].

The world’s leading specialists were involved into creating the Bibliotheca Buddhica series. The series was inspired by a prominent scholar specializing in Oriental studies S.F. Ol’denburg (1863-1934), whose activity contributed to distinguishing Buddhist art as a separate object of scientific research, publishing one of the world’s first catalogues of Tibetan pictorial art.

The major tasks for studying Tibetan pictorial art became identification of images (both pictures and sculptures), creation of iconography. The first album of this type was *Das Pantheon des Tshangtsha Hutukt* published by E. Pander (1890) [Pander, 1918], which contained 190 images.

German scholar Prof. A. Grundewel made a description of the biggest collection of Buddhist images and sacred Lamaist objects, which belonged to Prince Ukhtomsky. The translation of part of Grundewel’s book was also published within the series [Gryundewel’, 1905]. Grundewel was one of the first researchers of the origin of specific artistic features in Buddhist art, who actually distinguished two major influences in it: those of Persian and Ancient Greek cultures.

This scholar was the first to mention the correlation of iconographic texts and images, to stress the characteristic feature of Buddhist art – exact adherence to the canon [Grunwedel, 1900, 104]. In other words, he was the first to establish the tradition of research within the framework of iconography as a means of identifying the canon of proportion and sizes of the image, which was later described by K.M. Gerasimova: “every level of pantheon has its own measure, its set of obligatory features. The type of stature, form of face, typical position of eyes – all these formal features have a significant meaning, distinguish the functional and essential characteristic of the deity, identify its place in the system of pantheon” [Gerasimova, 1973, 117].

In 1903, S.F. Ol’denburg published an album of Buddhist iconography featuring Tibetan xylography of the 18<sup>th</sup> century printed according to the book by Tibetan Lama Chankya Hutuktu Rolpai Dorje (1717-1786) *The Tree of 300 Images Collection* [Sbornik izobrazhenii..., 1903, 115]. The book comprised the Tibetan alphabet index and became the first edition of this kind in Russia. Ol’denburg suggested identifying the images through searching for the analogue in the album. He was one of the first to classify the Buddhist pantheon into 12 groups. This album was widely used throughout the world to identify the collections of Buddhist images in Buddhist museums [Vorob’eva-Desyatovskaya, Savitskii, 1972, 158].

The researcher was also the first to describe many artefacts of Buddhist art. S.F. Ol'denburg published the *Materials on Khara-Khoto Buddhist iconography* (1914) [Ol'denburg, 1914], in which the author namely championed the idea of Tibetan painting's independence from the Chinese tradition supporting the idea of its closeness to the Indian art: "The samples of Tibetan writing <...> are starkly different from the samples of Chinese writing and provide irrefutable evidence of <...> the major, distinctive influence of the Indian painting on the Ancient Tibetan one <...> It immediately separates the Tibetan painting from the Chinese one, as the Indian painting, in terms of its techniques, is a Western, i.e. plastic, one" [Ibid, 74].

Especially rich art materials were collected during the expedition chaired by N.K. Roerich; they became the basis for Yu.K. Rerikh's (1902-1960) work *Tibetan Painting* [Roerich, 1925; Rerikh, 2000], a fundamental study on iconography of Tibetan Buddhism. The principles, purposes and problems of the research identified by this major study on Tibetan art are still of relevance. Yu.K. Rerikh states: "Though the complete history of Buddhist art hasn't been written yet, we can already claim the unity of its evolution. <...> creations born by a joint effort of Hellenic genius and Indian spirit have preserved their unique originality through the centuries" [Rerikh, 2000, 7].

Underlying the Indo-Nepal influence, Yu. Rerikh claims the development of independent schools of art in Tibet and then proceeds to analyzing the images classified according to the types of depicted heroes: Buddha, Bodhisattva and others.

It is worth mentioning E. Clark's publication of two Buddhist pantheons found in Beijing by Baron Stael von Holstein [Clark, 1937]: the first volume includes introduction, bibliography, indices of deities in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese languages; the second one comprises illustration. In his review of this book written in 1939, Yu.N. Rerikh [Roerich, 1939, 343-346] set forward a very significant methodological principle: he suggested considering the texts of Dubthab (sadhana) rites introduced to the scientific discourse by B. Bhattacharya to be the major source of iconography.

Created in 1930 on the basis of Asian Museum, College of Oriental Studies, Institute of Buddhist Culture and the Cabinet of Turkic Studies, the Institute of Oriental Studies in Leningrad carried out research of the Tibetan language grammar (F.I. Shcherbatskoi, A.I. Vostrikov), historical literature which includes the descriptions of Tibetan relics (A.I. Vostrikov); Tibetan-Russian dictionary was being prepared for the publication; Tibetan traditional medicine (B.V. Semichov), Buddhist philosophic texts (translations and research by F.I. Shcherbatskoi, E.E. Obermiller, S.F. Ol'denburg) were being studied. But the work so brilliantly begun was interrupted during the repressions: in 1937 "practically all the topics in tibetology were stopped" [Vorob'eva-Desyatovskaya, Savitskii, 1972, 172], and so far the renaissance of tibetology in Russia hasn't started, yet" [Vorob'eva-Desyatovskaya, Zorin, www].

As the Institute returned from the evacuation, the Tibetan Cabinet ceased to exist as it is. In 1950, the Institute of Oriental Studies was restructured and most of the staff and the library were transferred to Moscow. After the collection of Tibetan documents on wood from the Lop Nor area was described by V.S. Vorob'ev-Desyatovskii (1928-1956), the work on processing the Tibetan manuscripts and xylography was continued by M.I. Vorob'eva-Desyatovskaya and E.I. Kychanov.

By that time the collection had grown tremendously due to Tibetan xylography received from the Institute of Religion and Atheism of the USSR Academy of Sciences. A small part of the fund which was identified and arranged had to be mixed with unarranged manuscripts because of the urgent transfer of the Tibetan fund to small premises in 1960 where any work with manuscripts became temporarily impossible. These two small rooms still remain the major storage of Tibetan manuscripts up till now. Worth mentioning is the Asian Classics Input Project's contribution to the creation of a computer catalogue of the Tibetan manuscript and xylography data. In 2009 the cataloguing of the fund was completed, which resulted in releasing a CD [Zorin, 2009], which has become a unique experience of presenting the Tibetan art heritage.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century is a period of significant development of the Tibetan art research both on the world and domestic levels. The publications of the first catalogues of Tibetan art, works by S.F. Ol'denburg and A. Grunwedel meant distinguishing Tibetan art as a self consistent object of art research. While the world tibetology strengthened its positions, domestic study on Tibet suffered irreparable losses in the late 1930s and, despite the richness of the material, it was not until the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the new works in Russian were published.

### **Research of the late 20<sup>th</sup> – early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: methodology and principles**

The late 20th century was marked by Chinese expansion in Tibet, which became an irreparable loss not only in social and political terms, but also in relation to the traditions of Tibetan art. The world tibetology, however, was collecting more and more materials; Tibetan government in exile opened Tibetan spiritual traditions to the world, namely providing more access to the materials on various arts, technology of their creation and symbolism.

New domestic works on Buddhist art started to appear in the late 1970s. It was when the most significant translations and comments on the iconometric sources were made. Here we will consider the most revealing of them.

Works by K.M. Gerasimova [Gerasimova, 1973; Gerasimova, 1995], in particular her monograph *The artefacts of the aesthetic thought of the Orient. The Tibetan canon of proportions* introduce new texts and facts to the scientific discourse, develop principally new understanding of iconometric canon

as an application of the philosophical category of system measure to the esthetic modeling of an iconographic image. K.M. Gerasimova presented a strong case that “from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century there was a process of accumulating knowledge contained in the Buddhist sources of India and it was not until the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries that Tibetan tradition proper started to be formed” [Gerasimova, 1971, 29].

Though L.N. Gumilev’s book *Old Buryat painting* [Gumilev, 1975] deals predominantly with the analysis of artefacts belonging to the culture adjacent to Tibet, it still contains some interesting observations. The author draws a parallel between Tibet and Byzantium as two major spiritual centers: “Unlike western Europeans, Muslims and the Chinese who were spreading the principles of their civilization through the force of weapons and who flooded the lands captured by them with blood, Byzantium and Tibet only strived for the lordship over hearts and souls. They sent teachers instead of invaders. This is the reason why the literacy, education and artistic taste were accepted by the warlike Ruses from the bearded monks in black habits and by the insuppressible Mongols from the shaven-headed Lamas in yellow cloaks” [Ibid, 3].

Following Yu. Rerikh, L. Gumilev repeats the idea of the similarity of the esthetic goals of the icon creators: “Buddhist icon painting, like the Christian one, is limited by the religious and esthetic canon which stipulates for the forms and attributes of the depicted deities and saints, but it also provides opportunity for expressing the artist’s creative individuality within the canon” [Ibid, 5], which proves the fruitfulness of applying the methodology of Russian icon painting studies when considering the Buddhist pictorial art.

In the introductory article dealing with the Buddhist art on the whole, L.N. Gumilev rather brightly and precisely characterizes the Buddhist art: “No other religious system of the world has such a well-developed iconography, as Buddhism does. The number and diversity of images to be worshiped seems to be unlimited in Buddhism (Lamaism) at the first sight, but when studied carefully, the diversity appears to be restrained by a strict system, while the plot representation is subject to a no less strict canon. However, the place is also left for personal creativity <...> The content and sense of the Buddhist icon are always embodied into the image of an abstract idea implemented in line and paint. Quite often these are mercy and wisdom, no more rarely – anger and jealousy to the faith, sometimes retribution for sins or deterrence, there are also images of the parts of the world – north, south, east and west – or some occupations, e.g. medicine. These are rather symbolic signs than paintings, but the figures are anthropomorphous and the esthetic canon is maintained extraordinarily strictly. On the one hand, these peculiarities make it more difficult to perceive the studied art, as knowledge of the plot is essential for understanding the painting. On the other hand, however, they open broad horizons of

oriental ethics and esthetics, as well as history” [Ibid, 4].

L.N. Gumilev’s remark acknowledges the principal features of Buddhist art: following the philosophical principle of uniting the opposites, it unites the dichotomously split virtues: canonicity and personal creativity; symbolism and anthropomorphism. The combination of canonic requirements (philosophically and religiously motivated esthetic tradition) and personal creativity, allegory and likelihood allows to talk of the art, namely that of Tibet, precisely as of art as contrary to mechanic production of once accepted canons.

The works by E.D. Ogneva [Ogneva, 1973; Ogneva, 1979; Ogneva, 1983; Ogneva, 2008] containing translations and comments on Tibetan texts have become an important stage in developing the theoretical basis for studying the Tibetan Buddhist iconography. She makes a significant remark about the political aspect of studying Tibetan art: the actual value of the research, namely the study of written sources with the theoretical grounding for the pictorial material to belong to the traditional Tibetan culture “is directly relevant to the issue of Indo-Tibetan cultural contacts in connection with the struggle against Maoist concepts of original ‘Chinese ground’ of the Tibetan culture” [Ogneva, 1979, 5]. E.D. Ogneva also studies the principles of classifying the Tibetan Buddhism iconography, translates an iconometric treatise by a Medieval author Dzonghava [Ibid, 32-40].

It is also worth mentioning significant research by E.V. Ganevskaya connected with North Buddhist metal sculpture in the collections of the State Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, the State Museum of Oriental Art [Ganevskaya, 1984; Ganevskaya, Karpova, 1992; Ogneva, Ganevskaya, Dubrovin, 2004; Ganevskaya, 2004]; works by A.F. Dubrovin [Dubrovin, 1989], N.V. D’yakonova [D’yakonova, 1961, v. 6, 257-272] and others. N.L. Zhukovskaya’s publications on Lamaism based on the pictorial material contain detailed comments on the major allegoric images in painting (mandala, lotus, vajra, etc.) [Zhukovskaya, 1977].

Iconographic work is also performed in our country. “When editing the Tibetan pictorial material, the major principle is the balance between text – album – image, despite all the efforts it may require” [Ogneva, 1977, 14].

In the 1970-1980s a new system of identifying Buddhist images was offered in Leningrad Museum of Religion and Atheism as published by A.A. Terent’ev in 1981 in the museum’s volume; in 2003 it was published as self contained handbook [Terent’ev, 2003]. Although the author claims that “the idea to identify iconographic images according to the consecutively arranged set of features, as it is done, say, through taxons in botanics or enthomology, was quite obvious” [Ibid, 3-4], an identifier like that wasn’t created before. The book provides tables of iconographic elements with their Sanskrit, Tibetan, Russian and English names, offers the standard for describing Buddhist images. Based on this standard,

the identifier with a database has been created which includes about 5000 images and 7000 names. The book, however, contains only part of the identifier, which allows to identify 1052 images or vice versa – to find out by the name what 1500 Buddhist characters look like. The Annex contains authentic Tibetan iconographic materials: 84 mahasiddhas and the pantheon of Kalachakra Tantra consisting of 156 images which was published for the first time. This is one of the most significant identifiers since the publication of a two-volume encyclopaedia of Buddhist deities by Fredrick Funce [Bunce, 1993].

Starting from the 1990s, we can witness the increase in the number of editions dealing with collections of Buddhist painting and sculpture, as well as publications dealing with the issues of identifying images and peculiarities of the national style of different schools of Buddhist art (Ts.-B.B. Badmazhapov [Badmazhapov, *Ikonografiya...*, 1995; Badmazhapov, *Tibetskie traditsii...*, 1995; Badmazhapov, 2003], S.G. Batyreva [Batyreva, 2005], A.L. Barkova [Barkova, 2000; Barkova, 2004], V.V. Demenova [Demenova, 2008; Demenova, Urozhenko, 2010], Ya.I. Elikhina [Elikhina, 2006], A.V. Zorin [Zorin, 2009], R.N. Krapivina [Krapivina, 1981], I.F. Murian [Murian, 2001; Murian, 2005], T.V. Sergeeva [Sergeeva, 1998; Sergeeva, 2002], V.L. Uspenskii [Uspenskii, 1988; Uspensky, 2001] and others).

## Conclusion

At the first stage (late 18th – late 19th century) marked by the works of G.F. Müller, I.J. Schmidt, A.M. Pozdneev, G.Ts. Tsybikov, B.B. Baradiin and other researchers and explorers, the Tibetan art was part of a complex object of Russian tibetology: researchers described the cultural artefacts alongside ethnographic characteristics, political and historical descriptions. This necessary stage enriched out knowledge of Tibetan art with a wide range of descriptive material; the artefacts which were later lost had been characterized; the first attempts to interpret Buddhist art had been taken.

The second stage in researching Tibetan art (late 19<sup>th</sup> – mid-20<sup>th</sup> century) was connected with distinguishing the Buddhist art as a self contained object of scientific research. The works and publications by S.F. Ol'denburg, A. Grundewel, Yu.N. Rerikh became significant steps on the way to solving the major task – publication, description and cataloguing of the object of the research, i.e. iconometry and iconography of Tibetan art. An important position is occupied by the identifiers of Tibetan iconography created to identify the images (both painting and sculptures). The collected material allowed the researchers to start dealing with the issues of evolution and interpretation of the Tibetan art.

The last stage of Tibetan art research started in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It was marked with the creation of large-scale and practically overwhelming catalogues and directories, identifiers of Tibetan art (A.A.

Terent'ev, A.F. Zorin), translations of Tibetan treatises on art and comments to them (K.M. Gerasimova, E.D. Ogneva), opening new areas of research and deepening of individual topics. The new area in the research of Tibetan art led to the interpretation of images, sculpture, architecture within the context of the multi-century Buddhist culture in the works by K.M. Gerasimova, L.N. Gumilev.

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**История исследования искусства Тибета в России:  
от начала русской тибетологии до середины XX века**

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**Аннотация**

Данная статья представляет собой исследование истории исследования тибетского искусства в России в контексте истории тибетологии в целом. Выделяются три этапа исследований искусства Тибета с подробным описанием особенностей каждого из них. На протяжении первого этапа (конец XVIII – конец XIX в.) тибетское искусство входило в комплексный объект исследования российской тибетологии: исследователи описывали памятники культуры наряду с этнографическими характеристиками. Этот этап обогатил знания об искусстве Тибета массой дескриптивного материала; были охарактеризованы памятники, впоследствии не сохранившиеся, и предприняты первые попытки интерпретации буддийского искусства. (конец XVIII – конец XIX в.). На протяжении этого этапа был описан и каталогизирован предмет исследования, т.е. решена задача иконометрии и иконографии тибетского искусства. Собранные материалы позволяли исследователям задаваться вопросами эволюции и интерпретации тибетского искусства. Последний этап исследований искусства Тибета начался в середине XX века. Он был ознаменован созданием масштабных и практически всеобъемлющих каталогов и указателей, переводов тибетских трактатов об искусстве и комментариев к ним. Интерпретация изображений, скульптур, архитектуры была осуществлена в контексте буддийской культуры.

**Для цитирования в научных исследованиях**

Курасов С.В. История исследования искусства Тибета в России: от начала русской тибетологии до середины XX века // «Белые пятна» российской и мировой истории. 2018. Том 8. № 6. С. 10-28.

## Ключевые слова

Русская тибетология, Тибет, искусство, искусство Тибета, исследование искусства Тибета.

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