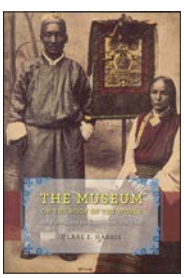
Tibet



Clare E. Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 328 pages. List of illustrations, introduction, acknowledgements, a note on languages, notes, references, index. 19 color plates, 50 halftones, 1 line drawing. Cloth, US$45.00. ISBN 9780226317472.

A SUGAR-SATURATED, hyperactive kid at Christmas gives you some idea of what the publication of new Clare E. Harris book is like for me. Breathless, I can hardly wait to clear my schedule, tear open the cardboard mailer, pull out the new tome, and spend the next few hours in single-pointed concentration reading refreshing perspectives on my passion—Tibet. Clare Harris's works are consistently novel and full of unique ironic twists and marvelous insight, a treat for the world-weary on

roads far too traveled. Innovation and creativity are rare in modern Tibet studies, so it is with eager anticipation that one should always approach Harris's writings. The reader of *The Museum on the Roof of the World* will not be disappointed. She is as magical in this book as reindeer flying through the skies and as entertaining as Santa squeezing through the chimney.

Clare Harris comes to Tibet studies from somewhat of a unique perspective, being the curator of the Asian collections at renowned Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, home of major collections of Tibetan artifacts, photographs, and written documents reflective of the British Empire's long political fugue with Tibet. Harris thus understands the philosophy of modern museum interpretation and the history of the Western museum as an imperial archive. She discusses how throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, imperial powers simultaneously condemned and controlled their colonies by the removal of artifacts (and in some cases living people or dead ones) from subject societies, conserving and exhibiting them in state museums. To have one's culture banished to a museum was to receive a death notice that your culture was no longer seen as viable by the occupying power. Museum collecting, until at least the postcolonial era, was a legitimate way by which an imperial power could appropriate booty and exhibit it as a trophy of past cultures. Harris argues that this attitude has been particularly pernicious towards the people of Tibet, observing that now, more portable objects of material culture reflecting traditional Tibetan culture exist outside of Tibet than within. Two major factors have been responsible for this appropriation: the agents of the British Empire of the early-to-mid-twentieth century, and the Chinese government since the occupation of Tibet began in 1950. In both cases, motivations have mostly been based on notions that the golden statues, paintings, ritual objects, clothing, and other "works of art" had to be removed and preserved since within their native context, traditional Tibetan society, they were considered moribund or extinct and thus incapable of salvage. There is usually little mention that the reasons for the apparent extinction are the agencies of the occupiers themselves. This has also been a widespread interpretive perspective with the indigenous peoples of the United States, where "native voice" is just beginning to be heard, to the surprise of many museum visitors.

Harris argues that the "absence of Tibet as an independent political entity goes some way to explain the present ubiquity and popularity of Tibetan art" worldwide (18). This is quite true in that the state is a traditional preserver (and creator) of national cultural forms. She argues that the pillage of Tibetan material culture by the British and Chinese occupiers in the twentieth century has made available a vast amount of Tibetan objects now contained in Western museums, galleries, and private collections. Harris subsequently describes how Tibetan artifacts, divorced from their cultural milieu but still associated with a mysterious religion from a "forbidden land," help account for their continuing popularity. In all this she never explains, however, how the lack of a country contributes to this interest. In the long history of humanity, there have been hundreds of states that have come and gone; there does not seem to be a correlation between that process of decline and an outside interest in the exotica of the eclipsing culture. Harris seems to suggest

that the state of Tibet never existed, which goes against most informed interpretations of Tibetan history. When the occupation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China was brought before the United Nations in 1950, Tibet had to be first accepted as a state—it was, as an autonomous one, but a state nevertheless.

I believe what Harris is referring to in the presentation of Tibet is the perniciousness of the Western view of Tibet as a mythological rather than a "real" place. Tibet as myth is derived from the literary construct of Tibet as the land of Shangri-La, a paradigm that has dominated Western imagination for generations and is still dominant in the way museums present the Tibet story to Western audiences. This is by now a well-worn critique, articulated by Bishop, Lopez, and just about every other Tibetologist since the 1980s, but it is still valid. A corollary to Tibet-as-Shangri-La is the perspective that since Tibet was never a real country, Tibetans cannot use historical precedence in their modern claims for self-determination. The shared imperial archive perspective of Britain and Communist China also posits that Tibetan culture can be appreciated without consideration of the rights, feelings, and interpretation of Tibetan people because it is representative of a universal religion, Buddhism, that can be consumed by all without the messy influence of a living culture. Because Tibet is of the realm of myth, fact and fiction can be used interchangeably to serve political or cultural goals.

In many ways, Western and Chinese museums share similar Shangri-La stances in the interpretation of Tibetan culture. This is not too surprising, for Chinese Marxism and Western Positivism share common origins. The conceit is basically that Tibet and its culture are far too "traditional" or "ancient" to be viable in the contemporary world, thus objects which are products of this culture must already be ossified and therefore need preservation in museums for leisure-time consumption by the wider society, that is, the modern world. Harris guides the reader step-by-step through this logic. For the West, Tibetan Buddhism, divorced from the people who created it, can somehow present itself as a balm for the ills of modern psychological angst. In the process, the political ramifications of interpretation without representation can be amputated. In Tibet's case, it was as if the people never existed. This is clearly seen in the nearly universal appeal of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to lend luster to any event in the West, provided he does not talk about the right of self-determination for his own people. Over one hundred Tibetan men and women have burned themselves to death, and the Dalai Lama can say nothing.

Throughout the beautifully written prose of Harris's arguments, she carefully crafts how the mystical Western view of Shangri-La developed and how the Younghusband expedition of 1904 invaded and forced the Tibetan government to the bargaining table while systematically being looted. She discusses the invasion of the forces of the People's Liberation Army in 1950 and the maddening destruction of the monastic complexes and their treasures during the Cultural Revolution. Harris, as a curator of Asian art, is uniquely situated to know that much of what is considered "Tibetan art" abroad is the product of the looting of these artifacts by imperialists and colonialists, that is, Britain and China. And she is among the first to write about it. Harris also looks at two major exhibits in the West on Tibetan culture in recent years, and examines two styles of museums in China's Tibet

which attempt at interpreting its history. What is ironic is how similar the various interpretations are. In nearly every case, the Tibetan people themselves are largely absent, or if they exist at all, are largely objectified and stereotyped.

Eventually, however, Harris breaks free and examines modern Tibetan art, which she explains as somewhat of an oxymoron in and of itself. She notes that in the creation of new media and new styles, Tibetan people have begun to reclaim their identity as part of the living rather than the dead. This is quite a bold statement, as there are many who argue that these new creations cannot be legitimately Tibetan, and rather that they are clear signs of loss or degeneracy. In this role as a critic of modern Tibetan art, Harris is peerless.

The presentation of modern Tibetan art forms, in the homeland as well as in exile, brings up the age-old question of authenticity, and Harris constructs a good analysis of the hyper-inflated market for genuine Tibetan artifacts, the demand being partially met for the masses by knock–off souvenirs sold in touristy modern Lhasa. She does not mention in detail, however, the broad market for "reproduction" antiques, the cheap bronze statues, religious paintings, and cabinetry made to look old and sold broadly in the West, largely imported from Nepal and China. This activity could support her main argument, in particular that the lack of native cultural monitors at the production stage is directly correlated with their lack of political control. It still remains to be seen if modern Tibetan art will breakthrough these market prejudices and be accepted as a genuine form of self-determination. For this, the reader may well have to wait, in eager anticipation, for Clare Harris's next book.

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