TIBET'S FIRST MODERN ARTIST

DONALD S. LOPEZ JR.

Fig. 1 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan,1903–1951); Woman Applying Kohl; India, ca. 1940; watercolor; 10 × 6 in. (25.5 × 15.4 cm); Private Collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. *2012. 2012 nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan* 2012 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy Latse Library

GENDUN CHOPEL'S WOMAN APPLYING KOHL

India
Ca. 1940

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SUMMARY

Scholar of Tibetan Buddhism Donald S. Lopez Jr. introduces Tibet's modern philosopher, historian, poet, and painter Gendun Chopel using the illustration of Chopel's famous guide to India. Chopel, a monk trained in traditional art, illustrated his travels in India and Sri Lanka, applying Western methods of watercolor and perspective. This documentation of a woman painting her eyes is an interplay of the religious and secular. Chopel's legacy is evidenced in the writing and art of contemporary Tibetans.

This watercolor, untitled by the artist, is the work of Gendun Chopel (1903–1951), one of the most important Tibetan cultural figures of the first half of the twentieth century, renowned as a poet, painter, philosopher, and historian (fig. 2).[1] Born in Amdo, the northeastern region of Tibet, he was the son of a prominent lama of the Nyingma tradition and was himself identified as the incarnation of a famous Nyingma teacher. His father died when he was a young boy, after which he became a monk of the Geluk tradition, distinguishing himself as a debater at Labrang Monastery. He was expelled from the monastery for reasons that are unclear; his unorthodox philosophical views may have been one factor. In 1928 he traveled to Lhasa and enrolled in Drepung Monastery to continue his studies. During his time in the monastery, he supported himself as a painter, producing works in the traditional Tibetan style.

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Fig. 2 Photographer unknown; Gendun Chopel (Tibetan, 1903–1951); India; 1935; photograph; Private Collection; photograph courtesy Donald S. Lopez Jr.

In 1934, as he was completing the monastic curriculum, he was asked by his teacher Sherab Gyatso (1884–1968) to serve as the guide to the Indian scholar and political activist Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963), who had come to Tibet in search of Sanskrit manuscripts. At the end of their tour of monasteries in central Tibet, Sankrityayan invited Gendun Chopel to go back with him to India. He accepted the invitation, not returning to Tibet until 1945, traveling extensively through India and Sri Lanka and writing his two most famous works. The first was a verse work on erotica (he had given up his monk's vows by this point) called *Treatise on Passion*.[2] The second is what he considered his most important work, an account of his travels, with essays on South Asian and Tibetan history and culture, entitled *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan*

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Traveler.[3] The painting here was intended as an illustration for this book. He also contributed essays and poems to *Melong* ("Mirror"), the only Tibetan-language newspaper of the day, published in Kalimpong, India, including an essay in 1938 explaining that the world is round, rather than flat, as it is described in Buddhist texts.[4]

Gendun Chopel returned to Tibet in 1945. The following year he was arrested on trumped-up charges of counterfeiting currency and sentenced to three years in prison. Numerous theories have been put forth for his arrest. His involvement with a group called the Tibet Improvement Party (whose logo he designed) was likely one factor. He emerged from prison a broken man and died two years later, in 1951, as troops of the Chinese People's Liberation Army marched into Lhasa.

Gendun Chopel made numerous illustrations for *Grains of Gold*, both in pen and ink and in watercolor. The majority of these works have been lost. Among those that survive, each is numbered in Gendun Chopel's own hand, with the highest number being 178, giving some sense of how richly illustrated he intended his book to be. Twenty-seven paintings survive, together with a sketchbook.[5] The paintings present a wide range of subjects in a number of styles. Some reproduce famous Buddhist works (fig. 3), while others are more scientific, depicting archaeological artifacts and Indian plants (figs. 4 and 5), providing dimensions. Yet others might be called ethnographic, portraying for his Tibetan audience, a Brahman, a devotee of Shiva (fig. 6), a Hindu ascetic lying on a bed of nails (fig. 6), and a group of Indians bathing (fig. 7).

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Fig. 3 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan, 1903–1951); Sarnath Buddha; India; ca. 1940; watercolor; 14⅞ × 9 in. (37.8 × 22.8 cm); Private collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. 2012. *2012 nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan 2012* 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy of Latse Library

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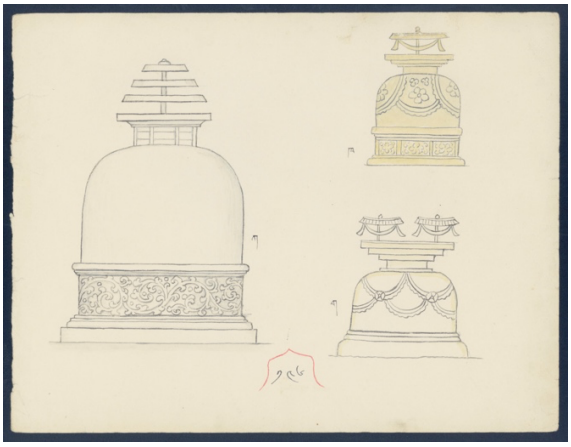

Fig. 4 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan, 1903–1951); Stūpas in Old Carvings; India; ca. 1940; pen and ink; 7½ × 9¾ in. (19.1 × 24.9 cm); Private collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. 2012. 2012 *nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan 2012* 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy of Latse Library

Fig. 5 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan,1903–1951); Godāvapa Stūpa; Sri Lanka; 1941; watercolor; 6 ⅝ × 10 in. (16.8 × 25.5 cm); Private collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. *2012. 2012 nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan* 2012 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy Latse Library

Fig. 6 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan, 1903–1951); Going on Pilgrimage on All Fours and An Ascetic Sleeping on the Points of a Thousand Wooden Spikes; India; ca. 1940; pen and ink; 11¼ × 7⅞ in. (28.6 × 19.9 cm); Private collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. 2012. *2012 nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan* 2012 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy of Latse Library

Fig. 7 Gendun Chopel (Tibetan, 1903–1951); Spring Morning; India; ca. 1940; watercolor; 8¾ × 12 in. (22.2 × 30.5 cm); Private collection; image after Xiong Wenbin and Zhang Chunyan, eds. 2012. *2012 nian de zhui xun: Xizang wen hua bo wu guan Gendunqunpei sheng ping xue shu zhan* 2012 年的追寻: 西藏文化博物馆根敦群培生平学术展. Beijing: Zhongguo Zang xue chu ban she; photograph courtesy of Latse Library

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Gendun Chopel is said to have supported himself as a painter during his years as a monk in Lhasa. Unfortunately, no works from this period can be confidently attributed to him. He is said to have been employed by Denchen Nyingpo, Second Pabongkha (1878–1941), the most powerful Geluk monk of the day. That he was asked to work for a figure of such renown suggests that he was considered highly skilled and that he painted in the traditional style. This makes his paintings from his time in South Asia all the more fascinating; they are unlike anything previously produced by a Tibetan artist. There are works in pen and ink, pencil, and, as in the work here, watercolor. These media, and his use of techniques such as single-point perspective, were not practiced in traditional Tibetan painting. He therefore must have learned them in India, where they had been brought by the British. It is not known where Gendun Chopel learned these techniques, from whom, and how he mastered them so quickly. We do know that he brought some of them back to Tibet when he returned in 1945; there is some evidence of his influence in the works of his friend and compatriot Amdo Jampa (1911–2002). In the decades after his death and continuing to the present day, he has been an important inspiration for Tibetan artists, both in Tibet and in exile.

The painting here offers a perfect example of the things he learned in India. Despite appearing to be a portrait of an Indian beauty, the watercolor also falls into the ethnographic category. This is not apparent from the painting itself, which may be based on a magazine advertisement for eye makeup. In the lower right-hand corner, in red, is the number "10" in Tibetan, indicating that this was intended as the tenth illustration in *Grains of Gold*. The writing below the painting, in two different languages and four different scripts, tells us much about Gendun Chopel's interests. The text

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directly below the painting is in Tibetan, written in the capital script that is used in printed texts. It reads, "The famous eye ointment from the poems is just the smoke of red lac. The skin around the eyes of Indians is naturally dark and they consider this a mark of youthful beauty. Thus, women use a small spoon to paint around their eyes."

Sanskrit poems often speak of the dark eyes of Indian women, who would apply kohl as eye makeup. Sanskrit poetry, especially Buddhist Sanskrit poetry, was well known to learned Tibetans, but the application of kohl would have been quite exotic. Thus, in this painting, Gendun Chopel illustrates a woman applying kohl, making the painting as much an illustration of the text as the text is a caption for the painting.

Sanskrit poetics, and belles lettres in general, were highly valued in Tibet, with many learned authors, both monastic and lay, studying Dandin's *Mirror of Poetry* (*Kavyadarsha*), an eighth-century work on poetic forms. Gendun Chopel himself studied the text as a boy. While in India, he learned Sanskrit well and is said to have read the text in the original. Indeed, he was rightfully proud of his knowledge of Sanskrit, reading many works on erotica, including the *Kama Sutra* in the original, not only for the expected purposes but because erotica was one genre of Sanskrit literature that did not exist in Tibet; his *Treatise on Passion* was intended to fill that lacuna.

Thus, the next element of the text below the painting is in Sanskrit, written in a somewhat stylized script. It is a passage from a famous Buddhist text called the *Heavenly Vine of the Deeds of the Bodhisattva* (*Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata*), a collection of one hundred and eight stories of the Buddha's past lives, in verse, by the eleventh-century Kashmiri poet Kshemendra. To indicate this source to a well-read Tibetan reader, he simply writes "vine" in cursive Tibetan to the left of the Sanskrit inscription.

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After the original Sanskrit, Gendun Chopel provides his translation of the passage into Tibetan, written in cursive Tibetan script:

> You are skilled in the arts of beauty.
>
> Why do you put eye ointment on your beautiful eyes?[6]

The speaker, praising the beauty of a woman's eyes, tells her that she does not need to apply kohl. This single passage immediately changes the painting from an ethnographic illustration to an illustration from a scene in a previous life of the Buddha, as the woman in the watercolor, upon hearing this verse while looking at the speaker to her left, stops just as she is about to put kohl on her eyes. To demonstrate his knowledge of Dandin's *Mirror of Poetry*, Gendun Chopel adds a note in cursive Tibetan that says, "subtle category," referring to the *sukshma* rhetorical form in Sanskrit poetics.

As we see, the Tibetan artist thus displays many skills on a single page, as a painter, an ethnographer, a scholar of Sanskrit literature, a translator, and a poet. Clearly proud of his achievement, he designs a stamp for the painting to identify its author. The blue square in the lower right says "Chopel."

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FOOTNOTES

[1] For a documentary film on Gendun Chopel, see *Angry Monk: Reflections on Tibet*, Color film (Zurich: Zurich: Garuda Verlag, 2005).

[2] *'Dod pa'i bstan bcos*. For a full translation, see Gendun Chopel, *The Passion Book: A Tibetan Guide to Love and Sex*, trans. Donald S. Lopez Jr. and Thupten Jinpa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[3] *Rgyal khams rig pas bskor ba'i gtam rgyud gser gyi thang ma*. For a full translation, see Gendun Chopel, *Grains of Gold: Tales of a Cosmopolitan Traveler*, trans. Thupten Jinpa and Donald S. Lopez Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[4] For a translation of all of Gendun Chopel's extant poetry, see Gendun Chopel, *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom: 104 Poems by Gendun Chopel; A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Donald S. Lopez Jr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For a translation of his essay on the round earth, see Donald S. Lopez Jr, *Gendun Chopel: Tibet's Modern Visionary* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2018), 134–37.

[5] Gendun Chopel's surviving paintings from *Grains of Gold* and his sketchbook have been published in Donald S. Lopez Jr, *Gendun Chopel: Tibet's First Modern Artist* (New York: Trace Foundation's Latse Library, 2013).

[6] My translation, in Donald S. Lopez Jr, *Gendun Chopel: Tibet's First Modern Artist* (New York: Trace Foundation's Latse Library, 2013).

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FURTHER READING

Gendun Chopel. 2009. *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom: 104 Poems by Gendun Chopel; A Bilingual Edition*. Edited and translated by Donald S. Lopez Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr. 2018. *Gendun Chopel: Tibet's Modern Visionary*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala.

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ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today. Along with a digital platform and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the Rubin's Project Himalayan Art, an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at: http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart

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