

# MASS PRODUCTION OF IMAGES AS A RITUAL PRACTICE

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Fig. 1 Molded Clay Image (Tsatsa) of Amoghapasha; Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet; 11th–12th century; sun-dried clay;  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 2\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$  in. ( $9.5 \times 6.3 \times 3$  cm); Private collection; photograph by Rémi Chaix

## MOLDED CLAY IMAGE (TSATSHA) OF AMOGHAPASHA

Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet  
11th–12th century

## SUMMARY

Art historian Kunsang Namgyal-Lama examines one of the hundreds of thousands of *tsatsas*—small clay images pressed from molds—that monks and laypeople in Tibet regularly produce. Kashmiri and Indian teachers taught this devotional practice in western Tibet from the tenth century onward, and the clay images of deities, stupas, and texts reflect the complex religious landscape of the time. Often made during funeral rituals, *tsatsas* are placed into stupas or around holy sites to this day.

This This clay plaque, recovered from western Tibet, constitutes a particularly noteworthy example of a *tsatsa* from the later spread of Buddhism (*tenpa chidar*, late 10th–13th century). Made using a mold, this type of image was abundantly produced in the Tibetan world. The ritual of making *tsatsas* spread to Tibet beginning in the second half of the eighth century.<sup>1</sup> However, it was only at the end of the tenth century that this practice of Indian origin underwent major developments in Tibet, as evidenced by archaeological findings and by the copious ritual literature.<sup>2</sup> According to later Tibetan traditions, the great Indian teacher Atisha (ca. 982–1054) played a central role in developing the practice of making *tsatsas* in Tibet.<sup>3</sup>

Canonical texts primarily advocate making *tsatsas* as part of ritual practices associated with the production and merit (*tsoksak*), as well as with the purification of negative deeds and obscurations (*dikdrib jang*). Though *tsatsas* have been generally produced to serve as consecration deposits to be placed inside stupas or for the final stage of funerary rituals, the reasons for making them and their uses in the Tibetan context have largely varied over the centuries. Parallel to ritual and textual developments, images depicted on *tsatsas* display rich iconographic diversity and evidence the same stylistic trends as those that influenced every other Tibetan artistic production.

The earliest *tsatsas* made in western Tibet during the later spread of Buddhism, initiated by the rulers of Guge and Purang at the end of the tenth century, provide relevant and particularly rich documentary resources for the study of Tibetan art history.

### **ICONOGRAPHY OF AMOGHAPASHA AND KASHMIRI AESTHETICS**

This sun-dried *tsatsa* depicts an aspect of Avalokiteshvara called Amoghapasha, the one with the “unfailing lasso,” a characteristic attribute that the bodhisattva holds here in his upper left hand. The Tibetan inscription of his mantra, scattered around his image, further helps to establish the identification. In this unusual and rare four-armed form, Amoghapasha is depicted sitting in a relaxed pose, his left leg pendent, the foot resting on a lotus pad. The first right hand, raised in the gesture of argumentation (*vitarka mudra*), holds a rosary, while the second one grasps the branch of an unidentified plant bearing small flowers. The first left hand, placed on his thigh, holds the stalk of a fully open lotus flower that is level with his face, right next to the lasso, each extremity of which ends with a half vajra. A third eye is visible on his forehead, and a small effigy of Buddha Amitabha appears against his towering coiffure. He wears an antelope skin over his left shoulder. Like several other Indian sculptures or paintings from Dunhuang depicting Amoghapasha, this one does not conform exactly to the various iconographic descriptions given in textual sources.<sup>4</sup>

On stylistic grounds, this small image reflects a strong Kashmiri aesthetic, specifically, in the treatment of the physiognomic and facial features, the tall ascetic chignon, and the jewelry, which are also found on existing Kashmiri bronzes.<sup>5</sup> Under the patronage of the Guge and Purang rulers, the Kashmiri style deeply inspired the art of the western regions of the Tibetan Plateau during the later spread of Buddhism. The invitation of Indian religious masters and artists to work in newly built temples, such as Toling and

Tabo, and the creation of numerous Buddhist receptacles (stupas, paintings, sculptures) contributed to the diffusion and adoption of foreign iconographic and stylistic elements.

The molds were either brought from India or created in the Tibetan context. Note that several molds were engraved after their production with new inscriptions. For example, on this *tsatsa* of Amoghapasha, the layout of his mantra, which is displayed vertically in a discontinuous manner on the available space around the deity, suggests a later inscription in Tibetan *uchen* script, while the “verse of Interdependent origination” (*Pratityasamutpadagatha*), in an Indian script, occupies the periphery and appears to be original.

### **TSATSAS AS IMAGES OF STUPAS**

While most of the major deities of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon and the main historical figures are represented on these objects, ritual texts primarily advocate the making of miniature stupa-shaped *tsatsas* (figs. 2 and 3). This directive finds its origin and justification in canonical texts that prescribe depositing certain effective formulas (*dharanis*), such as the *Pratityasamutpadagatha*, inside stupas, even tiny ones.<sup>6</sup> Such *tsatsas* shaped as stupas, reproducible in mass, have been considered privileged receptacles for these “sacralizing” formulas. These formulas can be written on various materials (tree bark, palm leaves, paper, cloth) or impressed on small clay seals and inserted into the miniature stupas.<sup>7</sup> The introduction of these formulas into the moldings is one of the essential ritual steps in the manufacturing process.<sup>8</sup> Thus consecrated, they can be deposited inside newly built stupas (fig. 4) or other receptacles to serve in turn as consecration deposits



Fig. 2 Molded Clay Image (Tsatsa) of a Stupa Molded in the Round; Toling Monastery, Ngari region, western Tibet; 11th–12th century; sun-dried clay; height approx. 4 in. (10 cm); Toling Monastery; photograph by Rémi Chaix



Fig. 3 Molded Clay Image (Tsatsa) of the “Heaped Lotuses” Stupa; Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet; 11th–12th century; sun-dried clay;  $3\frac{3}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{8} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$  in. (8.5 × 8 × 3.7 cm); Private collection; photograph by Rémi Chaix



Fig. 4 *Tsatsa* deposit inside a stupa in Ensa, Nubra Valley, Ladakh, India; photograph by Kunsang Namgyal-Lama, 2014

In western Tibet, a large number of *tsatsas* depicting stupas with various architectural shapes were produced between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. They feature some of the distinctive characteristics of the Eight Stupas of the Tathagata (*Deshek Chorten Gye*) as described by Tibetan scholars, at least from the end of the twelfth century or the beginning of the thirteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Miniature stupas molded in the round are mostly of a cruciform shape (fig. 2), with two flights of stairs at the center of each of the four main sides, under a central dome. This is a model that has sometimes been described as being of the type “Descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods” (*Lhabab Chorten*). However, given their similarity with the remains of monuments built in earlier periods and located in different regions of northwestern India (Kashmir, Afghanistan) and Central Asia (Rawak), we cannot make this identification definitive. Nevertheless, the figuration of the Eight Stupas seems more evident on plaque-shaped *tsatsas*, where we find not only the “Descent from Heaven” type, with the flight of stairs or the ladder (fig. 5), but also other types, often including the stupa of the “Many Auspicious Doors” (*Tashi Gomang Chorten*) or of the “Heaped Lotuses” (*Pepung Chorten*) (fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> The latter is easily identifiable by the ornamentation of lotus petals on its four circular steps, evoking those that miraculously appeared under the very first steps the future Buddha took after his birth. The existence of *tsatsas* depicting stupas with these architectural features suggests that these models may certainly constitute prototypes for the set of the Eight Stupas of the Tathagata that was standardized about the thirteenth century in Tibet. Interestingly, one *tsatsa* from Guge produced about the twelfth or thirteenth century illustrates a set of eight different stupas, of which at least five clearly feature the standardized characteristics (fig. 6).<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 5 Molded Clay Image (Tsatsa) of the “Descent from Heaven” Stupa; Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet; 11th–12th century; sun-dried clay; height 3 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (8.5 cm); Collection of Zhang Ying (张鹰); photograph by Kunsang Namgyal-Lama



Fig. 6 Molded Clay Image (Tsatsa) of Eight Different Stupas; Guge, Ngari region, western Tibet; 12th–13th century; sun-dried clay; height approx. 2 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (7 cm); Collection of Zhang Ying (张鹰); photograph by Kunsang Namgyal-Lama

## THE FUNCTIONS AND STATUS OF *TSATSAS*

*Tsatsas* are mainly manufactured during the erection of stupas to serve as consecration deposits and at the end of funerary rituals. Besides these two main contexts, they can be made for other specific purposes in connection with apotropaic, prophylactic, or therapeutic rituals. Their function and status differ depending on the context and purposes for which they are made and may determine the places where they are deposited. They are primarily placed inside stupas or special edifices built to house them (*tsakhang*), around sacred sites, in holy caves, or inside rock cavities. *Tsatsas* produced in a funerary context have a different status depending on whether they contain the mortuary remains of an ordinary lay person or of a religious master, in which case they are considered relics and placed inside funeral stupas, reliquaries (*gau*), or statues. Finally, *tsatsas* have been used as images for portable shrines, including *tashi gomang*, or as wall decorations (Alchi and Zhalu) (fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Molded Clay Images (*Tsatsas*) on the Wall of Yumchenmo Lhakhang, Zhalu Monastery, Tsang region, central Tibet; photograph by Rémi Chaix, 2018

In the Tibetan world, *tsatsas* are very common objects, and the ritual for making them is performed, individually or collectively, by religious specialists as well as by lay practitioners.<sup>12</sup> This practice was envisaged as a simple and efficacious ritual means to accumulate merit and improve one's karma. Most of the great Tibetan scholars, such as Nyangrel Nyima Wozer (1124–1192), the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), and Jamgon Kongtrul (1813–1899), composed ritual texts, some of which are still used today as basic manuals. With the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism, this practice spread to other countries, such as China and Mongolia, where it underwent remarkable developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.





Fig. 7 Content by Chandra Reedy, University of Delaware. Courtesy of the Bard Graduate Center, New York. Produced for the Agents of Faith: Votive Objects in Time and Place exhibition on view September 14, 2018 – January 6, 2019. Bard Graduate Center, "Tsa Tsa Making," *YouTube*, March 21, 2019, 5:49 <https://youtube.com/BX2DbFuqltc>.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The sojourn in central Tibet of Indian Buddhist masters, authors of ritual texts about the making of *tsatsas*, such as Shantigarbha, suggests that this practice spread around this period. By the ninth century Tibetans were already performing it, as attested by several Tibetan manuscripts mentioning *tsatsas* that were discovered in Dunhuang (Gansu), as well as by records of *tsatsa* texts in the inventories of imperial libraries.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning archaeological findings, see Giuseppe Tucci, *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 53–109; Huo Wei 霍巍 and Li Yongxian 李永宪, *Xizang Xibu Fojiao Yishu 西藏. 西部佛教艺术* [Buddhist Art in Western Tibet] (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe, 2001), 153–72; Jin Weinuo 金维诺, *Zhongguo Zangchuan Fojiao diaosu quanji: caca 中国藏传佛教雕塑全集4: 擦擦卷* [Complete book of Tibetan Buddhist sculptures in China, vol. 4: Tsatsa], *Tsatsa*, vol. 4 (Beijing: Beijing meishu sheying chubanshe, 2001); Xiong Wenbin 熊文彬 and Li Yizhi 李逸之, *Xizang Guge Caca Yishu 西藏古格擦擦艺术* [Art of Tsatsa from Guge, Tibet] (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2016). For ritual texts, see Kunsang Namgyal-Lama, “Les tsha tsha du monde tibétain: Études de la production, de l’iconographie et des styles des moulages et estampages bouddhiques” (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 18–34.

<sup>3</sup> Mchims nam mkha’ grags, “Dpal Ldan a Ti Sha’i Rnam Thar Rgyas Pa: Jo Bo Rin Po Che Dpal Ldan a Ti Sha’i Rnam Thar Rgyas Pa Yongs Grags [The Extended Biography of Glorious Atisha],” in *Jo Bo Rje Dpal Ldan a Ti Sha’i Rnam Thar Bka’ Gdams Pha Chos* (Ziling (Xining): Qinghai minzu chubanshe, 1994), 44–228, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW00KG09688>, 110, 163; Tony Huber, “Some 11th Century Indian Buddhist Clay Tablets (Tsha Tsha) from Central Tibet,” in *Tibetan Studies*:

*Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Narita*, 1989, ed. Shoren Ihara and Zuiho Yamaguchi (Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji, 1992), 496.

<sup>4</sup> For Indian or Dunhuang images, see respectively Thomas E. Donaldson, *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Abhinav Publications, 2001), 200–206; Kimiaki Tanaka, “Mandala des Huit Divinités, section du Lotus,” in *Sérinde, Terre de Bouddha Dix Siècles d’art sur la Route de la Soie*, ed. Jacques Giès and M. Cohen, Exhibition catalog (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1995), 400–401, 400–405; for further details, see also Lokesh Chandra, *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography*, vol. 1, Śata-Piṭaka Series (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1999), 290–309. Concerning canonical texts related to Amoghapasha, see Dorothy C. Wong, “The Case of Amoghapāśa,” *Journal of Inner Asian Art and Archaeology* 2 (2007): 151–58; Tuladhar-Douglas 2007, 164–66. For other contemporary tsatsas showing Amoghapasha found in Guge, see Xiong Wenbin 熊文彬 and Li Yizhi 李逸之, *Xizang Guge Caca Yishu 西藏古格擦擦艺术* [Art of Tsatsa from Guge, Tibet (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2016), 114–22.

<sup>5</sup> Pratapaditya Pal, *Bronzes of Kashmir* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt., 1975), 140–49.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning dharanis and the Pratityasamutpada stanza, see Kunsang Namgyal-Lama, “Les tsha tsha du monde tibétain: Études de la production, de l’iconographie et des styles des moulages et estampages bouddhiques” (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 15n59.

<sup>7</sup> Kunsang Namgyal-Lama, “Les tsha tsha du monde tibétain: Études de la production, de l’iconographie et des styles des moulages et estampages bouddhiques” (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 5, 17. These formulas can be substituted by a seed deposit (a few grains of either barley or wheat) over which dharanis have been recited beforehand.

<sup>8</sup> Concerning the stages in the ritual, see Giuseppe Tucci, *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism* (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 57–60; Kunsang Namgyal-Lama, “Les tsha tsha du monde tibétain: Études de la production, de l’iconographie et des styles des moulages et estampages bouddhiques” (PhD diss., University of Paris-Sorbonne, 2013), 132–49.

<sup>9</sup> Yael Bentor, “In Praise of Stūpas: The Tibet Eulogy at Chu-Yung-Kuan Reconsidered,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 38 (1995): 31–37.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see Xiong Wenbin 熊文彬 and Li Yizhi 李逸之, *Xizang Guge Caca Yishu 西藏古格擦擦艺术* [Art of Tsatsa from Guge, Tibet (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2016), 202–43.

<sup>11</sup> See Jin Weinuo 金维诺, *Zhongguo Zangchuan Fojiao diaosu quanji: caca 中国藏传佛教雕塑全集4: 擦擦卷* [Complete book of Tibetan Buddhist sculptures in China, vol. 4: Tsatsa], Tsatsa, vol. 4 (Beijing: Beijing meishu sheying chubanshe, 2001), 56n97; Xiong Wenbin 熊文彬 and Li Yizhi 李逸之, *Xizang Guge Caca Yishu 西藏古格擦擦艺术* [Art of Tsatsa from Guge, Tibet (Beijing: Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe, 2016), 227 n232.

<sup>12</sup> Note that *tsatsas* can also be made with the three other elements (water, wind, and fire).

## FURTHER READING

Namgyal-Lama, Kunsang. 2013b. “*Tsha tsha* Inscriptions: A Preliminary Survey.” In *Tibetan Inscriptions*, edited by Kurt Tropper and Cristina Scherrer-Schaub, 1–41. Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library. Leiden: Brill.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1988b. *Stupa: Art, Architectonics and Symbolism*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

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