

AN ARCHITECTURAL REPRESENTATION OF COMPLETE TANTRIC KNOWLEDGE

SHENGNAN DONG



Fig. 1 The Kumbum of Pelkhor Chode Monastery; Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1427–1442; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

GYANTSE KUMBUM

Pelkhor Chode Monastery, Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR)
ca. 1427–1442

SUMMARY

Art historian Shengnan Dong introduces the Gyantse Kumbum (“a hundred-thousand images,”), a monumental stupa depicting over twenty thousand deities in seventy-three chapels, which provide a nearly complete representation of the Buddhist pantheon as it was understood in the fifteenth century. As a major Buddhist project commissioned by a local prince in central Tibet, the temple compound was built at a time when Tibetans were beginning to develop their own artistic styles, and several famous artists may have been involved.

The Kumbum of Pelkhor Chode Monastery (ca. 1427–1442) is located in the heart of Gyantse County in upper Nyangchu Valley of the Tsang region (fig. 2). The name *kumbum* is commonly interpreted as “a hundred thousand images,” denoting the great number of deities depicted inside. It is one of the biggest chortens in Tibet and the best-preserved example of its kind. The artistic splendor of the Kumbum, built during a time of political turbulence after the fall of the Sakya Yuan polity (1244–1354), attests to the peak of the Gyantse dynasty as a burgeoning new power in central Tibet. The statues and painted deities it houses provide a nearly complete representation of the Buddhist pantheon as it was understood in the fifteenth century. A grand construction project that lasted for decades, the Kumbum preserves rich visual evidence for an emerging era of indigenous artistic creation.



Fig. 2 Pelkhor Chode Monastic Complex; Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1427; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

STRUCTURE, PROTOTYPE, AND SYMBOLISM

The overall structure of the Kumbum displays some of the essential elements of a Tibetan chorten, including a four-tiered base, a cylindrical vase called a *bumpa*, a spire base *harmika*, and a conical spire on top. Yet the seventy-three chapels spanning eight stories (fig. 3), with more than twenty thousand deities represented,¹ make it stand out as a unique edifice, as chortens in the Himalayas are normally solid and can only be approached by circumambulating the outside. The exterior decoration shows a remarkably eclectic style, revealing cultural exchanges with neighboring regions, as exemplified by the painted eyes on the *harmika* that are typical for stupas in the Kathmandu Valley, as well as the corbel brackets under the roof (fig. 4), an element from the Chinese architectural tradition.



Fig. 3 The Chapel of Purifying All Evil Rebirths, north side, third story, Gyantse Kumbum; Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); 1430–1435; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021



Fig. 4 Corbel Brackets under Roof of Bumpa, Gyantse Kumbum; Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1427–1440; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

The four-tiered terrace is designed in a twenty-corner plan (fig. 5). On each tier there are doors opening to individual chapels. Visitors enter these chapels via the open-air path surrounding each floor before reaching the *bumpa*, a round story with four main temples. Staircases lead further up into the *harmika*, where one can walk a two-story inner circumambulation path around the Central Pillar before climbing up to the topmost chapel inside the gigantic spire.

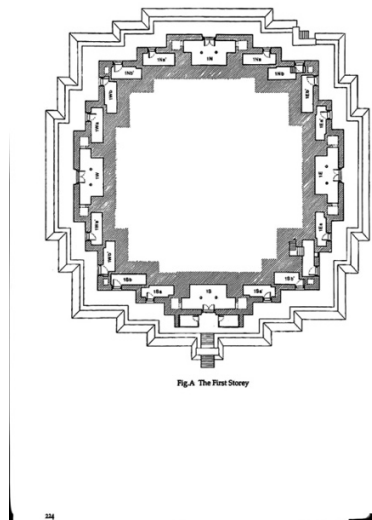


Fig. 5 Pelkhor Chode Monastery, Plan of the first story; Gyantse Kumbum, Gyantse; image after Ricca and Lo Bue 1993, 224, fig. A

The Kumbum of Gyantse takes the form of an Auspicious Stupa of Many Doors, or *tashi gomang*, one of the eight chortens in Tibetan Buddhist tradition commemorating the Eight Great Events in Buddha Shakyamuni's life. *Tashi gomang*, in particular, is a remembrance of the Buddha's exposition of dharma.² As explained by the third patriarch of Sakya, Khon Drakpa Gyeltsen (1147–1216), the numerous openings that adorn the four tiers symbolize the myriad doorways of the Buddhist teachings.³ *Tashi gomang* became popular in western Tibet during the tenth to twelfth centuries and were found in much simpler designs on many *tsatsa* clay tablets, or as architectural units (figs. 6 and 7).⁴



Fig. 6 *Tsatsa* Representing the Stupa with Many Doors; western Tibet; ca. 11th century; photograph by Elena Pakhoutova



Fig. 7 Corner Stupa of the Red Temple of Toling Monastery; Toling, Guge Kingdom, Ngari region, western Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 11th century; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

Immense *tashi gomang* like the Gyantse Kumbum emerged as early as the thirteenth century in central Tibet. Decorative niches of early *tashi gomang* were turned into actual entrances to chapels devoted to different tantras.⁵ These large chortens likely evoke Buddha's third turning of the wheel, an occasion when tantras were first taught at the Glorious Stupa of Dhanyakataka in South India, as widely believed in the Tibetan tradition.⁶

ICONOGRAPHIC PROGRAM, STYLE, AND ARTIST COLLECTIVE

From the lowest level to the top, chapels of the Gyantse Kumbum are arranged in a hierarchical order in accordance with the Four Classes of Tantras, as systemized by Buton Rinchen Drub (1290–1364). This fourfold scheme of categorizing tantric teachings belongs to the New Transmission Period traditions. The bottom two stories are mainly devoted to Kriya Tantra and the Charya Tantra, the two lower classes of the system, while the chapels of the third story are mostly associated with Yogatantra. On the fourth story, various lineages of masters who contributed to the introduction of these tantric cycles to Tibet are represented (fig. 8), connecting the terrace to the *bumpa*, where devotion to Yogatantra continues in the four temples dedicated to Vairochana, Vajrasana (the diamond throne in Bodhgaya), Shakyamuni, and Prajnaparamita respectively. The double-story *harmika* is a space for the two aspects of the *Anuttarayoga Tantra*, the Father and Mother tantras. In the top chapel sits Vajradhara, the Adibuddha embodying the ultimate origin of the universes,⁷ surrounded by masters of Kalachakra, representing the third aspect: the nondual tantras.⁸



Fig. 8 Mahasiddha Virupa with Sonam Tsemo at right; Chapel at the southwest corner, Level 4 of Gyantse Kumbum, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); mineral pigments on clay; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

Although they were repainted over the centuries, almost all the large sculptures in the main chapels are the fifteenth-century originals. The sculptures are predominantly made of clay over an internal wooden structure.⁹ The Vajradhara inside the top chapel and the Vairochana in the east temple of the *bumpa* are the only gilded-copper exceptions (fig. 9), underlining their higher status in the whole tantric system.



Fig. 9 Statue of Seated Vairochana, East Temple, Level 5 (Bumpa) of the Gyantse Kumbum; Gyantse Kumbum, Tsang region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1427–1440; gilded copper; photograph by Shengnan Dong, 2021

Encircling the sculptures are mural paintings of features drawn from both Indic and Chinese sources, showing a diversity that echos the designs of the Kumbum's outer structure. The prevalence of sumptuous vegetal curls and floral motifs suggests a dominance of Nepalese style in the overall rendering. Meanwhile, Chinese elements permeate in the stylistic design of clouds and a naturalistic treatment of the figures.

The grand project attracted a galaxy of talents, whose work was overseen by Rinchen Peldrub, the abbot of Nenyng Monastery, a then prosperous teaching center near Gyantse. Inscriptions in different chapels document the names of at least thirty-nine painters from different regions of the Tsang region, which may explain the diverse styles coexisting in the Kumbum. The inscriptions also indicate that in most chapels the master artists worked in teams with their students instead of on their own.¹⁰ Their work demonstrates the wide range of modes and styles available to the artists, and potentially how different ideas might have circulated among them.

Many scholars are of the opinion that the Gyantse Kumbum represents the maturation of a Tibetan style,¹¹ while some maintain that the art of the Kumbum still stands at a transitional point.¹² What is clear is that the art contained in the Kumbum is closely related to two major later Tibetan art schools. According to an artist manual attributed to the founder of the Menri style, Menla Dondrub, he once studied with Peljor Rinchen and Sonam Peljor, the master artists from Nenyng who led the decoration at the Gyantse Kumbum.¹³ Recent studies further propose that Khyentse Chenmo, the founder of the Khyenri style, might have once worked with Menla Dondrub as apprentices at Gyantse or Nenyng. This means that the project at Gyantse may have played a direct part in the development of their own styles.¹⁴

PATRONAGE AND RELATED PROJECTS

Rabten Kunzang (1389–1442, r. 1414–1442), the prince of Gyantse, was the main donor of the Kumbum and the entire monastic complex.¹⁵ During his reign, the principality thrived at an unprecedented level, so it was able to compete with other major powers like the Rinpungpa or even the Pakmodrupa establishment that superseded Sakya rule in the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁶

The ruler embraced a nonsectarian attitude toward Buddhist teachings and sponsored a great number of other artistic and building projects. Besides the magnificent chorten, he famously commissioned a set of three giant appliqué thangkas (fig. 10), depicting the Buddhas of the Three Times,¹⁷ which are the earliest large-scale cloth thangkas that have survived to this date. The weaving of the Maitreya image, in particular, was based on sketches made by one of the Nenyng master artists mentioned above, Sonam Peljor.¹⁸ These thangkas were likely shown consecutively over three days during the Sagadawa festival, commemorating the enlightenment of the Buddha, similarly to how this is practiced at Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse.¹⁹ Considered as Liberation through Seeing images, they render the display an important occasion for viewing.²⁰ The wall specially designated for their exhibition sits on the mountain ridge above the monastic complex and is visible from miles away (fig. 2).



Fig. 10 Appliqué Cloth Thangka of Maitreya, based on a sketch by Sonam Peljor; Gyantse; 1437–1439; colored silk embroidered on silk; 73 ft. 10 in. × 73 ft. 10 in. (22.5 × 22.5 m); image after Henss 2014, fig. 727

The Kumbum witnessed Gyantse's own grandeur as a local dominion and a high point in the history of Tibetan art. Even after the fall of the principality at the end of the sixteenth century, it has remained one of the most important pilgrimage sites of the Tibetan Buddhist world. The idea of opening doors to pictorial depictions of the Buddhist divinities continued in the portable *tashi gomang* shrines used by traveling monks, a Bhutanese cultural heritage dating to the seventeenth century.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Giuseppe Tucci, *Gyantse and Its Monasteries*, ed. Lokesh Chandra, trans. Uma Marina Vesci, 3 vols., *Indo-Tibetica* 4 (Reprint, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1932), 1:172; Giuseppe Tucci, *Fan tian fo di. Di si juan. Jiangzi ji qi siyuan. 梵天佛地. 第四卷. 江孜及其寺院*, ed. Wei Zhengzhong (Vignato Giuseppe) and Saerji, 2 vols., *Indo-Tibetica* 4, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), 1:30n1.

² Giuseppe Tucci, *Fan tian fo di. Di si juan. Jiangzi ji qi siyuan. 梵天佛地. 第四卷. 江孜及其寺院*, ed. Wei Zhengzhong (Vignato Giuseppe) and Saerji, 2 vols., *Indo-Tibetica* 4, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009). The Chinese edition of *Indo-Tibetica* 4 (Tucci 1941), provides full documentation of the inscriptions from different chapels of the Gyantse Kumbum, including about one-third of the text that was omitted in Tucci's original publication; see Giuseppe Tucci, *Fan tian fo di. Di si juan. Jiangzi ji qi siyuan. 梵天佛地. 第四卷. 江孜及其寺院*, ed. Wei Zhengzhong (Vignato Giuseppe) and Saerji, 2 vols., *Indo-Tibetica* 4, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2009), vol. 2. For wider discussions on the eight events in the Indo-Tibetan tradition, see Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, "The Eight Great Caityas and Their Cult," *Indian Historical Quarterly* 17 (1941): 223–35.

³ Yael Bentor, "On the Indian Origins of the Tibetan Practice of Depositing Relics and Dhāraṇīs in Stūpas and Images," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995): 35–39. A similar version of the eulogy is found at Juyong Guan Stupa.

⁴ Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica I: "Mc'od rten" e "Ts'a ts'a" nel Tibet indiano ed occidentale, contributo allo studio dell'arte religiosa tibetana e del suo significato* (Rome: Reale accademia d'Italia, 1932), 1: pls. 5, 6; Elena Pakhoutova, "Reproducing Sacred Places: The Eight Great Events of the Buddha's Life and Their Commemorative Stūpas in the Medieval

Art of Tibet (10th–13th Century)” (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2009), 55–56, fig. 2.7.

⁵ Many of these stupas were associated with influential masters. See Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Reprint, 3 vols. (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1949), 179–96; Roberto Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet* (London: Serindia, 1990), 123–36; Matthew Akester, *Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo’s Guide to Central Tibet* (Chicago: Serindia, 2016), 487–90, 608–9, 615, 637–39, 653–56.

⁶ See Ariane Macdonald, “Le Dhānyakataka de Man-Luns guru,” *Bulletin de l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 57 (1970): 169–213; Helmut Hoffmann, “Buddha’s Preaching of the Kalacakra Tantra at the Stupa of Dhanyakataka,” in *German Scholars on India*, ed. Cultural Dept. of the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, vol. 1 (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1973), 136–40.

⁷ The Adibuddha is the primordial buddha from which all other buddhas and deities emanated. This conception was promulgated mainly by the dissemination of the Kalachakra cycle of tantras after the eleventh century and is interpreted differently within the Tibetan tradition. The Nyingma tradition considers Samantabhadra as the Adibuddha, while for the New traditions, it is Vajradhara who sits in the center of the doctrinal universe.

⁸ For an iconographic description of each room, see Franco Ricca and Erberto Lo Bue, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse: A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century* (London: Serindia, 1993), app., 225–313.

⁹ On the making of clay sculptures, see Christian Luczanits, “Early Tibetan Clay Sculpture,” *Aziatische Kunst* 33, no. 2 (2003): 2–15.

¹⁰ Erberto Lo Bue and Franco Ricca, *Gyantse Revisited* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1990), 32.

¹¹ Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Reprint, 3 vols. (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1949), 1:206–7; Franco Ricca, “Stylistic Features of the Pelkhor Chode at Gyantse,” in *Tibetan Art: Towards a Definition of Style*, ed. Jane Casey Singer and Philip Denwood (London: Laurence King, 1997), 196–209, 198; Heather Stoddard, “Early Tibetan Paintings: Sources and Styles (Eleventh–Fourteenth Centuries A.D),” *Archives of Asian Art* 49 (1996): 41–43.

¹² David P. Jackson, *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting: Early Beri to Ngor*, Exhibition catalog, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 2 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2010), 148–50, https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/nepalese_legacy_96.

¹³ Sman thang pa sman bla don grub, “Bstan bcos legs bshad nor bu’i phreng ba,” in *Ri mo’i thig tshad dang tshon gyi lag len tshad ldan don du gnyer ba rnam la nye bar mkho ba mthong ba don ldan*, 1985, 177–88, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW8LS44211>, quoted in David P. Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 42 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 108.

¹⁴ David P. Jackson, *A Revolutionary Artist of Tibet: Khyentse Chenmo of Gongkar*, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 6 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2016), 7, https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/a_revolutionary_artist_96.

¹⁵ Erberto Lo Bue, “The Princes of Gyantse and Their Role as Builders and Patrons of Arts,” in *Proceedings of the Fifth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*,

Narita 1989, ed. Ihara Shoren and Yamaguchi Zuiho, vol. 2 (Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji, 1992), 559–73.

¹⁶ For the political history of the Gyantse principality, see Karl-Heinz Everding, “Gyantse: Rise, Prime and Decline of a Tibetan Principality in the 14th–16th Centuries,” in *Fifteenth Century Tibet: Cultural Blossoming and Political Unrest. Proceedings of a Conference Held in Lumbini*, ed. Volker Caumanns and Marta Sernesi (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2017), 33–62.

¹⁷ They depict Dipamkara, Shakyamuni, and Maitreya.

¹⁸ ‘Jigs med grags pa, *Rgyal rtse chos rgyal gyi mam par thar pa dad pa’i lo thog dngos grub kyi char ’beb* (Lhasa: Bod ljongs mi dmangs dpe skrun khang, 1987), 241, 244, quoted in Michael Henss, “Liberation from the Pain of Evil Destinies: The Giant Appliqué Thang Kas (Gos Sku) at Gyantse (Rgyal Rtse Dpal ’Khor Chos Sde),” in *Art in Tibet: Issues in Traditional Tibetan Art from the Seventh to the Twentieth Century. PIATS 2003: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, ed. Erberto Lo Bue, Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library, 10/13 (Erberto, Oxford: Brill, 2011), 79.

¹⁹ Michael Henss, “Liberation from the Pain of Evil Destinies: The Giant Appliqué Thang Kas (Gos Sku) at Gyantse (Rgyal Rtse Dpal ’Khor Chos Sde),” in *Art in Tibet: Issues in Traditional Tibetan Art from the Seventh to the Twentieth Century. PIATS 2003: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, ed. Erberto Lo Bue, Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library, 10/13 (Erberto, Oxford: Brill, 2011), 73–74.

²⁰ On his other projects, see Karl-Heinz Everding, “Gyantse: Rise, Prime and Decline of a Tibetan Principality in the 14th–16th Centuries,” in *Fifteenth Century Tibet: Cultural*

Blossoming and Political Unrest. Proceedings of a Conference Held in Lumbini, ed. Volker Caumanns and Marta Sernesi (Lumbini: Lumbini International Research Institute, 2017), 33–62; Lo Bue 1992. On the Tsuklakhang of Gyantse, see Ulric von Schroeder, *Empowered Masters: Tibetan Wall Paintings of Mahāsiddhas at Gyantse* (Chicago: Serindia, 2006).

FURTHER READING

Lo Bue, Erberto, and Franco Ricca. 1990. *Gyantse Revisited*. Florence: Le Lettere.

Ricca, Franco, and Erberto Lo Bue. 1993. *The Great Stupa of Gyantse: A Complete Tibetan Pantheon of the Fifteenth Century*. London: Serindia.

Tucci, Giuseppe. (1932–41) 1989. *Gyantse and Its Monasteries*. Edited by Lokesh Chandra. Translated by Uma Marina Vesci. 3 vols. Indo-Tibetica 4. Reprint, New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan.

CITATION

Shengnan Dong, "Gyantse Kumbum: An Architectural Representation of Complete Tantric Knowledge," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/gyantse-kumbum>.

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>