

## Letter from Tibet

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IT IS TOO COLD to write, either in my tent or out here watching the heatless setting sun turn to pink the immense, icy, northern, Tibetan wall of the Himalayas. For ten days we have hiked from the rain forests of Nepal and their orchids, parrots and monkeys, north through the main range of the Himalayas along the bottom of the Kali Gandaki, 18,000 feet deep, the deepest gorge on earth, between the summits of Dhaulagiri and Annapurna. Today we climbed out of the gorge, in a delicate January snowfall, into Tibet. Tomorrow we hope to explore Muktinath, a major Indian and Tibetan holy place, which has been reached by mountain climbers, and by a few artists such as the noted Japanese photographer Kazami Takehide, but which has never, so far as I know, been studied or described by an art historian.

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Today we made our pilgrimage to Muktinath. It has been a brilliant sunny day, with the flawless steel blue sky stretching north over all Tibet. No forests grow here, only chaste and austere slopes of grass tufts and desert bushes, like America's own high Western sagebrush country, good yak pasture. There are five villages in this little Tibetan valley, on short ridges, close built jumbles of adobe brick houses, some six stories high, with fine carved window grills and surrounds, and dark twisting alleys underneath. Each roof sprouts a forest of prayer flags, bamboo poles carrying thin, vertical, white banners with prayers inscribed in black letters.

Paths into the villages pass through bell-domed gatehouses with decayed Buddhist frescoes inside. The two larger villages have modest, ruined, square, gray castles in their centers, and larger, redwashed, square

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*gompas*—monastery-temples—at one end. Outside the villages are snowy fields and leafless, pollarded orchards, which must be life-givingly green in the summer. But no village dares extend itself near Muktinath.

In the year 889, tradition tells us, some Tibetan merchants almost froze in a storm coming down from the Thorong-La, a 17,800 ft. pass up the steep gravel slopes just east of here. Nearly dead, they camped where some water sprang from a rock. Without fuel or hope, they tried to set fire to some snowsoaked desert brush. The water burst into flames that burned the whole night through, saving their lives. After almost 1100 years, the flame is still burning here, for the merchants had lit a vent of natural gas that escapes from the rock just over the water. To Hindus it is a miracle of Vishnu as Muktinath, “the Liberation Lord,” to Buddhists a compassionate act of Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, the patron power of Tibet, of whom the present Dalai Lama is judged to be the fourteenth modern incarnation.

And so, over the centuries, shrines, temples, pagodas and monasteries have been built around this eternal flame, 12,500 ft. up the northern slope of Annapurna, the tenth highest mountain in the world. Sometimes, we are told, 70,000 pilgrims congregate here for the main festival in June, some walking 1500 miles from the coconut strands of South India. A few days from now the King of Nepal will come by helicopter to pay his respects to Vishnu, whose incarnation he is himself. Because an earlier King of Nepal seized this small Tibetan kingdom of Mustang in the 1770's, it was not part of the Dalai Lama's state of Tibet in the 1950's, when the Chinese introduced so many changes, so traditional religion and art still survive in the holy places of Muktinath.

There is no wall around the sacred area of about ten acres, and no symmetrical plan, for no royal benefactor ever built an overall layout at any one time. The buildings and monuments straggle up the slope just below the rock cliff that shoots thousands of feet up to the blue-white ice. Entering pilgrims pass two walls, each 100 feet long, which are there to hold dozens of prayers wheels, canisters (some originally Caltex oil cans!) mounted on thin vertical rods so they can be twirled as one walks, which “says” the prayers inscribed on them in *repoussé* bas relief. At first glance, the sacred area looks weirdly Japanese, with its large, planted, now leafless *changma* trees, its frozen brooks and cascades and its irregularly placed wooden pagodas. Before a second glance, we must register at the police station.

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We may only visit the three chief sites. The others have fallen to pieces, or are locked up for the winter, or both. Most of the adobe-rubble buildings are dormitories for pilgrims to the main festival, or for the now-absent monks, but it hurts to have to pass up the largest temple, dominated by a majestic three-story pagoda in the Nepalese style that claims to be the origin of all Far Eastern pagodas.

We go through one of the Tibetan monasteries, a red brick building whose wings are falling into its court. A transverse antechamber runs thirty feet across the main body of the building. There are brightly and recently painted but weather-ruined frescoes of Buddhas sitting in rows around three sides of it. To the right is a six-foot high prayer canister, with "OM MANI PADME HUM!" on seven registers around it. The inner wall is protected by a marvellous pierced, grilled, carved, painted wooden screen, four registers across and four panels up and down. A monstrous blue face of a protective god dominates the center, lions and a *makarah* (Vishnu's incarnation as a water-monster) the sides, with lotus all about. The temple chamber behind it is a square room twenty feet across with four square columns holding up the roof and the cupola in the center. Three five-foot high bronze Buddhas glint dully against the back wall, the center one Calling On The Earth To Witness. Two ancient-looking indoor stupas on the right side. Dark frescoes of rows of sitting Buddhas, and other sacred figures in groups, engaged in a *sacra conversazione*, all around.

There is no possibility of getting enough light to study them and determine their quality, or of finding someone who knows their history. The iconography, the complex symbols and the connected legends might be very thoroughly explained, but style and dates are not of any local concern. "Yes, very old." My semi-educated guess is that the two stupas are indeed hundreds of years old, but not the paintings or the sculpture, that they are all Nepali work for Tibetan patrons, and that they are all provincial and unmemorable as works of art, save for the grilled screen, which has great decorative panache. But this may never be known for sure before their imminent ruin.

We move on to the Main Temple of Chenrezī-Vishnu, which its Hindu priest dates, improbably, to 889. We remove our boots to duck and step through a carved gate in its columned outer wall into a small, icy, stone-paved court. In the center is a small pagoda, twelve by twelve feet and three low stories high, built of plastered rubble with finely carved wood

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on the cornices, struts, doors, and projecting pagoda-stories. This is an entirely Nepalese Hindu temple, to all appearances, though there is a five-foot prayer canister outside it, turned, in warmer weather, like a millwheel, by the now frozen brook it stands in. The priest of Vishnu reveals, behind the smeared altar, inside the pagoda, a blackened statue of the god, with attendant figures, notably an aggressive, parrot-beaked Garuda. Shiva's squared *linggam* and tridents are kept outside the precincts of Vishnu, along with Buddha's prayer wheel. Again, it is very hard to be confident of any great age or quality in all this, but the wear due to harsh weather and intense devotion is obvious.

We climb to a small hillock of brush scattered with groups and rows of little *chortens*, memorial shrines with cubic bases and bell tops, made of brick and crudely plastered, rarely over six feet high. Here is the actual temple that encloses the Fire That Comes Out of Water. The temple is in one wing of a Tibetan brick building on three sides of a court, above a steep snowy slope. The hall is about thirty feet square, held up by log columns and beams. The usual smoke-darkened and weather-damaged frescoes all around, Buddhas in rows and groups in *sacra conversazione*. Freestanding statues of Chenrezí-Vishnu and his monster guardians near the walls. On the walls and on poles are a great many *tanka* paintings on silk of complex *jataka* scenes, and banners with larger, simpler paintings on cotton, layer on layer, which made it hard to judge them. A clothesline strung across the hall is weighed down with *ex voto* bracelets and necklaces, dull with dusty jewels. The shrine woman tucks back an elaborate silk cloth covered with flowers at the far end of the hall near the floor, as one might draw back the oilcloth in front of the pipes under an old-fashioned sink, to reveal the yard-high, inches-wide cleft in the rock, from which the spring still gushes and the flame still jets, the miraculous, ever-living presence of god.

Who made all this? The monks, says the shrine woman; artists from Nepal, says the Hindu priest. When were these things made? Very old, says the shrine woman; 600 years ago, says the priest. When were they last repaired? In my grandfather's time, says the the old woman; ten years ago, says the priest.

I should like to bring you complete knowledge of this amazing site. If I learned the languages, stayed here for years with good cameras and lighting and a small chemical laboratory. . . . If I cultivated the monks and went with them through all the books and documents rolled and

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piled up on the shelves of the several monasteries here, then I might write the art history of Muktinath. . . . If I looted and destroyed the shrines, and took a hundred porters' loads of art back across the Himalayas to cleaning and preserving laboratories 1,000's of miles away, I might add some masterpieces to museum collections of Tibetan and Nepalese art, to be appreciated by a few cultivated members of other faiths or none.

None of this will be done soon, or at all. Time and the impulses of modern civilization may bring decay or even destruction to Muktinath, but Muktinath will remain a great religious site for Tibetans and Hindus even after such a destruction. Muktinath would probably be judged only a second or third rate artistic site if it became thoroughly known to the international world of art. . . . "merely provincial, no royal patronage, suffers much from clumsy later restorations." It is hilariously frustrating to be the person who attempts the first artistic description of Muktinath; it makes me more tolerant of the travelers of earlier centuries whom we criticize as if they were artistically blind. A pilgrimage to Muktinath is a great religious experience, even to an infidel such as me. As an artistic experience, it is exhausting, fascinating, puzzling, maddening and magnificent.