About the portraits of Tibetan masters

by Jean-Luc Estournel

February 28, 2021

(click on the small image for full screen image with captions.)

Lovers of Tibetan art have all been struck by the large number of paintings and sculptures depicting lamas. The quasi-divinization of the spiritual masters transmitting the teachings which are thus expressed through art is at the origin of the word "Lamaism" which is sometimes used to evoke Tibetan Buddhism.

The majority of these representations were clearly made for commemorative purposes, for the use of disciples wishing to remain linked to the spirit of their masters, for monasteries wishing to preserve portraits of their abbots, or to integrate series retracing spiritual lineages of transmission, or successive incarnations of a bodhisattva through a succession of masters considered as tulku (*sprul sku*).

These representations are generally considered stereotypical and idealized. However, examination of the corpus of ancient works shows that artists often took care to represent these masters with relatively individualized features, sometimes even allowing them to be recognized without having to read the dedicatory inscriptions.

Fig. 1

We can for example evoke the very numerous statuettes of certain lamas, such as those of Sonam Lhundrub of Lo (Mustang) (*glo bo mkhan chen bsod nams lhun grub*) (1456 -

1532) which all represent him with the same corpulence and almost always the same facial features more or less finely treated according to the size of the works (Fig.1). This relative individualization of a character's features automatically leads us to wonder whether it would be possible to determine whether or not they are real portraits.

In 1949, in his opus magnum "Tibetan Painted Scrolls", Professor Tucci, who was one of the few to have been able to explore the great Tibetan sanctuaries and their artistic contents before their destruction, set out his point of view on the subject.

« *The typical features of each single master have early been established by artistic schools and handed down most faithfully: hence, while the schematic drawing and the hieratic fixity of these figures are such that they cannot be spoken of as portraits, undoubtedly the most representative figures of Tibet's religious history have become unalterable types, and if other suggestions, like votive inscriptions, were lacking, it would not be difficult to recognize them. Tsongkhapa, the fifth Dalaï Lama, the Panchen dPal ldan ye shes, in all the tankas belonging to the most different schools, have so well-defined an individuality, that it is impossible not to recognize them: these types nearly always go back to portraits (sku bag) made in the times of the personages themselves, which have later become models for successive artists.* » [1]

One of the oldest literary mentions of a realistic portrait resembling a master that gave rise to reproductions is the one reported by the Blue Annals, of the clay statue of Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa (*rdo rje rgyal po phag mo gru pa*) (1110-1170) that is said to have been placed in his thatched hut at Densatil (*gdan sa mthil*) after his death in 1170. [2]

"*The precious image which was found in his grass-hut ('Jag-spyil) after his death, was erected by his disciples who had mixed into the clay medical substances, precious stones, silks, etc,, as well as his ashes, Great was its blessing. The image on several occasions uttered words. After mice had carried away some clay from one of the corners of the image's seat, the image drew the attention of the sacristan, who repaired the damage done by mice. They made many images from the clay taken away by mice. These became known as byi-sa-ma ("mouse-clay"). Many images were also made from the clay chat remained after the erection of the image, and these became known as dras-sa-ma ("cut-clay"). The image which was placed on the preacher's seat (chos-khri) was built by a man named Mar-pa Lha-snin at Man-'gar-sgang. When the work had been roughly completed; a nun who was unknown in the locality, came there and said: "My Teacher was just like (this-image)! Do not touch it!" All felt surprised at her words. They placed the image on the preacher's seat and kept in here."*

If we ignore the sacred character attributed by the author to the image by evoking the words it would have uttered, we know that Gö Lotsawa (*gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal*), (1392-1481) evoked a work that he had probably seen many times.

The very realistic character of this now destroyed sculpture is probably confirmed by Professor Tucci's account of his visit to the monastery and the hut in 1948. [3]

"The guide then led us into a hut inside the temple, where Drongon Pagmotru spent some time in meditation. The whole huge temple developed later on around

that lonely hut. An incarnate was now sitting motionlessly and meditating in it. That naked, narrow, dim place breathed mystery and devotion. There you could sit out of reach of worldly distractions, on a small, secluded surface where throughout the centuries pious souls have experienced the ultimate merging in God while still living in this world. I felt unaccountably overpowered by that sense of mystery and it cost me an effort to tear myself away from that cell, as if by entering it I had bodily trodden over the threshold of another world."

The description of the minimalist interior of the hut (naked, narrow, dim...) without mentioning the statue but describing a lama in meditation might imply that Professor Tucci confused the earthen image perhaps covered with real monastic attire with a living being in meditation.

Over the years, we have been allowed to observe some small clay statuettes representing undoubtedly, given the physical characteristics, Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa (Fig.2). Being executed in an ancient style, it might be possible to consider them as falling into the category of *byi sa ma* or *dras sa ma* mentioned in the Blue Annals.


Fig. 2

Since the publication of "Tibetan Painted Scrolls" in 1949, eminent scholars such as Jane Casey Singer [4], Heather Stoddard [5], David Jackson [6] or Rachel Q. Levy [7] have continued to explore the notion of real or unreal portraiture, applicable to the representations of Tibetan masters.

The simple observation of hundreds of sculptures or paintings representing Tibetan masters makes it possible to note that the majority of the works, even realized during the lifetime of the subjects, certainly represent them with physical characteristics which make it possible to individualize them and to recognize them, but remain nevertheless most of the time treated in a relatively idealized and not very realistic way if one carefully compares the various known portrayals of each of these masters.

The idea here will not be to continue the reflection on the probability or not of the existence of real portraits, but to try to find clues to determine whether or not these portraits may or may not have been made during the lifetime of the subjects, in order to better date and classify the works.

We will see that as always with Tibetan art, the answer is never very easy to find, especially since the elements seem to have evolved over time, and sometimes in different ways depending on whether we consider sculpture or painting.

It is commonly accepted by many scholars that there seems to be a convention that "only deceased monks are usually depicted on a lotus pedestal " since it is only after their death that they acquire a more or less divine character.

However, are all representations of lamas not resting on lotus pedestals but on cushions to be considered as having been made during the lifetime of the model? An analysis of the large corpus of masters portraits quickly shows that this is not the case.

Fig. 3

It is therefore necessary to look elsewhere for potential elements that could provide us with an answer.

In 1977, Professor Ariane Macdonald, Dvags po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho published a long article dealing with two sculptures representing the 5th Dalaï Lama, which could provide a key to the resolution of our question. [8]

The first of these sculptures is made of copper alloy and presents the "Great Fifth" with relatively individualized features, bare head, sitting on cushions, a phurbu (*phur bu*) inserted in his belt. It is currently housed at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. (Fig.3)

The presence of a phurbu on the belt has long led the scholars to believe that it was an obscure lama of the Nyingmapa (*rnying ma pa*) school (while now it is known that the Fifth Dalai Lama was a student of Nyingma practices). The inscription on the back of the cushion has long remained enigmatic because the 5th Dalaï Lama is referred to there by one of his rare and little-known Tantric names, *Zil gnon bshad pa rtsal*. This name had been identified for the first time by Vostrikov in 1936 but his book "Tibetan Historical Literature" in which he compiled an almost exhaustive list of the various names of the 5th Dalaï Lama was not published in English in Calcutta until 1970.

The inscription is composed of two parts a priori written by two different people, the first being in verse. (Fig.4)

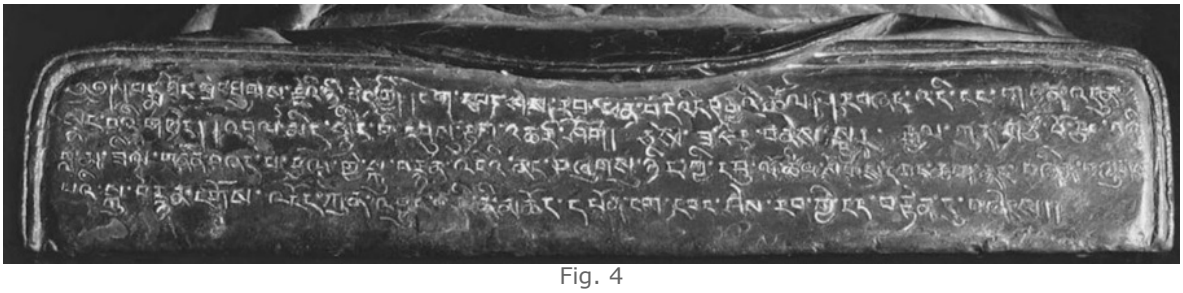

Fig. 4

The translation by the three eminent tibetologists mentioned above is as follows:

"May the sun rays of the blessing of Padmasambhava
Hatch the (lotus) hundred petals of what is useful and beneficial to Ngag dbang shes rab.
And may (this sun), source of light, always shine without ever leaving him, in the middle of his heart.
For his benefit in this life and in all others. This was composed by the monk of Zahor.

This statue of Zil gnon bshad pa rtsal, my main lama, the most eminent of all the Jina, contains as internal relics, hair and a tooth of his own person... according to the list in the inventory. This statue "like the jewel that satisfies desires and needs" was erected as a support for the fervor of the Chief of Offerings Ngag dbang shes rab.

According to Mrs. Macdonald, Dvags po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho, the expression "monk of Zahor" would have been proper to the « Great Fifth » to designate himself with humility while referring to the distant and legendary origins of his family.

This quasi-signature thus clearly indicates that the verses were written by the 5th Dalaï Lama himself for the benefit of Ngawang Sherab (*Ngag dbang shes rab*), the latter being the author of the second part of the inscription in which he refers to himself as the chief of the offerings.

Reading volume 3 of the *Dukula'i go bzang*, Mrs. Macdonald and her colleagues discovered that the “Great Fifth” reports that on the 19th day of the 6th month of the year 1679, he wrote various texts, rituals, prayers, texts to be written on the back of a thang ka ... a ritual of longevity for the Regent and himself ... a prayer dedicated to the great abbot *Ngag dbang 'phrin las* ... an inscription for a portrait sculpture of himself executed by the chief of offerings ... and final prayers for the printing of a text dedicated to the acts of the Buddha ...

Fig. 5

Since Ngawang Sherab occupied this position in 1679, it is conceivable that the text mentioned as intended for a statue executed by the chief of offerings is the one now in the Boston Museum, which would date the work to 1679.

All these elements bring the certainty that this small portrait of the 5th Dalaï Lama was indeed executed during his lifetime.

The second sculpture studied by Mrs Macdonald, Dvags po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho in this 1977 article is in clay and shows him wearing a master's hat, resting on a cushion, again with a phurbu passed at the belt (Fig.5).

The history of this sculpture is interesting since we know that it was offered by the 13th Dalaï Lama Tubten Gyatso (*thub bstan rgya mtsho*) (1876-1933) to David Macdonald during his secret stay in Lhasa and his multiple invitations to the Potala between December 1920 and January 1921. The purpose of this gift was to thank him for saving the Dalaï Lama’s life in January 1910, by allowing him to cross the Indian border when he was forced to temporarily flee Tibet. (David Macdonald was the British commercial agent at Yatung and Gyantse in Tibet between July 1909 and October 1924).

Long considered as terracotta, this sculpture was subjected to a thermoluminescence test in the early 1980s which revealed that the clay in question was insensitive to thermoluminescence, which implies that it is a particular material, probably purified or mixed with other substances. We saw above in the description of the realization of the statue of Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa at Densatil reported by the Blue Annals, the type of materials generally mixed with clay during the realization of clay portraits.

In preparation for the exhibition "Tibetan Rituals. Secret Visions of the 5th Dalaï

Fig. 6

Lama" at the National Museum of Asian Arts - Guimet - Paris in 2002, the object was entrusted to Béatrice Beillard, restorer of the French National Museums, who was able to analyze its structure and determine that it was lacquered raw clay and not earthenware. [9]

Here too, the inscription is fundamental for the dating of the work. (Fig.6)

The translation proposed by Mrs. Macdonald, Dvags po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho is as follows:

"*That by the diffusion of the statue of Ngag-gi dbang phyug blo-bzang rgya-mtsho by (the organization or person whose name ends with) khang-gsar, his affection is not dissociated from us, and that his reincarnation be born quickly*".

The “Great Fifth” is cited there under his most common name, and the last line of the text asking that his affection not be dissociated from the authors and that his reincarnation be quickly born clearly indicates that the sculpture was made shortly after his death, on the twenty-fifth day of the second month of 1682, and in any case before the secret recognition of Tsangyang Gyatso (*Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho*) (1683-1706) as the 6th Dalaï Lama in 1685.

The realization of this sculpture takes place in a very particular context insofar as it can only be the work of one of the members of the private house of the 5th Dalaï Lama. Indeed, on the instructions of the latter, his relatives kept his death and the recognition of Tsangyang Gyatso secret until 1696.

This government established by the Dalaï Lama could function without him, but on his behalf, as long as the Emperor of China, the Mongols and hostile Tibetan leaders, even within the Gelugpa school (*dge lugs pa*), were not informed of his death. It was therefore essential for Regent Sangye Gyatso (*sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*) (1653-1705) and his partners to discover as quickly as possible the new body taken by their master and to do most of his education in secret.

This very small group of people who signed a pact not to disclose their master's death was led by Regent Sangye Gyatso and a few ministers, including offering chief Ngawang Sherab, for whom the Boston statuette had been executed. The only person outside the government to know this was Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*) (1646-1714), the famous discoverer of hidden texts, who was one of the closest Nyingmapa "master and disciple" of the 5th Dalaï Lama.

The "Great Fifth" is represented here in the most classical form for a great lama. The details of her face are covered with gold lacquer and smoke deposits from the butter lamps that must have burned near the sculpture. However, the particularity

of this sculpture lies in the treatment of the Dalaï Lama's eyes. Actually, his right eye seems just ajar, while the left one is of a larger size and clearly more wide open. (Fig.7).


Fig. 7

This is highly unusual for a portrait of a pontiff but is undoubtedly related to the last event in the existence of the 5th Dalaï Lama as reported by the Regent Sangye Gyatso in his account of his master's last hours. [10]

The translation of the three authors is as follows:

« *There won't be any difficulties, it will be easy. It will be necessary to keep the secret. Pretend I'm here. As my predecessors asked the goddess Lha mo … as she is my main protective deity, which you cannot decide, ask Lha mo … Having said this, he reunited his body of appearance in his body of absolute with his face turned to the west as if he was not sleeping … I fainted with pain, and when I came to, he was sitting with his legs crossed, his back straight, his left hand open in the meditation position, and his right hand in the attitude of "earth witness" (bhūmisparśa-mudrā). As for his gaze, his right eye was closed, his left eye, without rolling up or down, was looking fixedly without moving, the space straight ahead. At that moment, overwhelmed with pain, I began to cry and scream with pain.* »

Considering that it is absolutely unthinkable to represent a master with closed eyes, it is therefore possible to consider that this left eye more widely open on the statuette is an allusion to this event, since this sculpture can be considered as the first post-mortem portrait of the "Great Fifth".

We are thus in the presence of two portraits of the 5th Dalaï Lama clearly dated during his lifetime for the first, and days after his death for the second. Apart from the hat on the second one, nothing at first glance seems to differentiate them overall.

However, if they are placed side by side, a clothing detail jumps out at us. This detail concerns the short-sleeved shirt, the tögag (stod ‘gag) commonly called "dhonka" in English [11] often more or less hidden in daily life under the other clothes worn by the monks. On the Boston sculpture it is depicted folding under the right arm of the "Great Fifth", while on the clay sculpture, the sculptor has made it pass under the left arm. (Fig.8).

Fig. 8 The tögag (stod ʻgag) commonly called "dhonka" is shown in color in these two images. Note that in the image on the left the tögag is folded under the right arm of the lama, while on the right the tögag is folded under the left arm. Click on the image for caption details

One can then wonder if this simple clothing detail could be considered as an distinguishing indicator of portraits made either during the master's lifetime (with the tögag folded under the right arm of the lama) or after his death (with the tögag folded under the left arm of the lama).

If we take, for example, groups of portraits of ancient masters, such as those mentioned above of Sonam Lhundrub of Lo (Fig.1), which are clearly posthumous since they are resting on lotuses, we can see that the tögag is always represented closed on the left side, as on the clay statue of the 5th Dalaï Lama.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

Still in ancient traditions, the numerous commemorative portraits such as those of Taklung (*stag lung*) or Drigung *(ʻbri gung mthil*) paintings or sculptures of the same period, systematically present the tögag also closed on the left side. (Fig.9 – Fig.10).

As a historical example, a statue of Dusum Khyenpa (*Dus gsum mkhyen pa*) (1110-1193) the first Karmapa, made shortly after his death to house some of his relics, was brought from Tshurpu (*mtshur pu*) in Tibet to Rumtek in Sikkim by the 16th Karmapa in 1959. (Fig.11). This posthumous sculpture that would be judged to be very similar presents it with the tögag folded down on the left side.

A priori, the ancient works should have, as thereafter, an essentially commemorative character, because very few present an abbot with the tögag folded down on the right side of the body. A thangka, however, presents us with

one (Fig.12). The lineage appears to be of Kagyupa (*bka' brgyud pa*) origin in that the monk on the left in the trinity figured in the center of the second row closely resembles ancient representations of Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa. The central part of the composition shows an abbot above a representation of Hevajra, both framed by footprints. Although the lama is resting on a lotus, his tögag is closed on the right side of his body. (Fig.13). Footprints are, of course, a form of divinization of the lama, referring to the representations of Buddha footprints common in ancient Indian art (Fig.14). If on other commemorative paintings of the same period the footprints seem to be simply drawn in reserve on the canvases, we are here faced with a special case. Indeed these prints are painted on textile fragments that are probably pieces of khata type scarf (*kha btags*) glued on the painting. In this particular case, it could therefore be envisaged that these pieces of textile could indeed have been initially leaned on the lama's feet during his lifetime, or at least have belonged to him.


Fig. 11


Fig. 12


Fig. 13


Fig. 14

On the basis of theses observations, it therefore seems pertinent to consider a small corpus of sculptures that are absolutely datable to the lifetime of the represented masters, beginning with those depicting the 5th Dalaï Lama.

A silver portrait in the Chinese History Museum in Beijing, executed for the visit of the "Great Fifth" to the Chinese Emperor Shunzhi in January 1653 (Fig.15), is thus undoubtedly contemporary with the model. The tögag is represented passing under the right arm, as on the Boston statue.

Another portrait bearing the inscription "*A sculpture of the omniscient Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso (touched/blessed) by the hand (with) barley*" can thus be considered as contemporary of the subject since touched/blessed by him. The tögag here also passes under the right arm (Fig.16).


Fig. 15

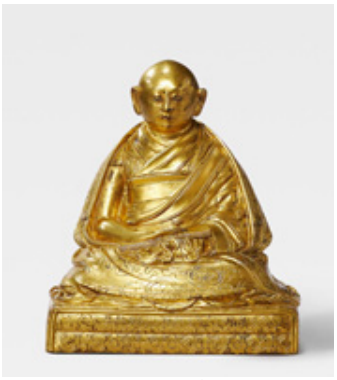
Fig. 16


Fig. 17

A silver portrait of the 9th Karmapa Wangchuk Dorje (*dbang phyug rdo rje*) (1556-1603) (Fig.17) was, according to different readings of the inscription, made in 1598 [12] or 1601 [] by a sculptor named Karma Rinchen. This sculpture realized with certainty during the subject's lifetime presents him with the tögag also passing under the right arm.

In 1979, Nik Douglas published a clay self-portrait made in 1630 shortly before his death by Chökyi Wangchuk (*chos kyi dbang phyug*) the 6th Shamar Rinpoche (*zhwa dmar rin po che*) (1584-1630) (Fig.18). This sculpture had been brought from Tibet to Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim by the 14th Shamar Rinpoche Mipham Chökyi Lodrö, (*Mi pham chos kyi blo gros*) (1952-2014). Being a self-portrait, we are thus in the presence of a work created during the model's lifetime, and once again the tögag passes under the right arm.

Another portrait of the same 6th Shamar Rinpoche (Fig.19) bears an inscription stating that the sculpture was consecrated with one of his teeth, implying that it must have been during his lifetime, and shows a tögag passing under his right arm.


Fig. 18


Fig. 19

Two silver portraits showing the 6th and 8th Karmapa (Fig.20) Thongwa Donden (*mthong ba don ldan*) (1416 - 1453) and Mikyö Dorje (*mi bskyod rdo rje*) (1507 - 1554) were undoubtedly part of the same commemorative series of the lineage. They are not unlike the portrait of Wangchuk Dorje mentioned above (Fig.17). Without really being able to attribute them to the sculptor Karma Rinchen, they seem to be linked to the same artistic tradition. This point makes it possible to propose a dating at the earliest around 1600, that is to say obligatorily after their death. In both cases, the tögag is folded under the left arm. Another portrait most likely from the same series shows a Karmapa with the tögag closed on the right side. He should therefore be the central figure in the series presenting the Karmapa alive at the moment of realization. In the absence of knowing the inscription, we cannot identify it with precision which would have made it possible to date the series.

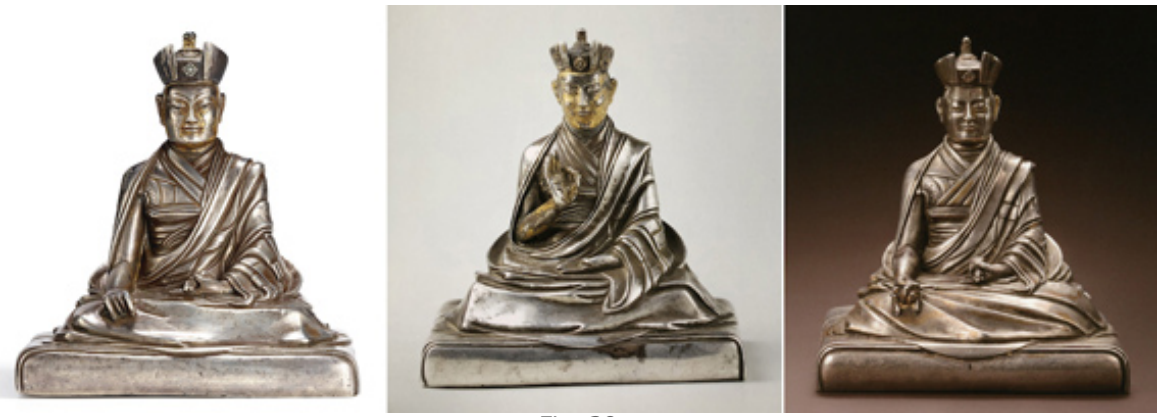

Fig. 20

From these few examples, we could perhaps consider as highly probable that the side on which the tögag is folded can be considered as an indicator of a portrait made during the living or not of the model.

This feeling can be reinforced by examining other masters portraits such as those of Rolpai Dorje, (*lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje*) (1717-1786) second Changkya Hthukthu of Beijing, friend and Buddhist spiritual master of Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799).

Two portraits obviously made by the greatest artists of the imperial workshops present Rolpai Dorje with features tending towards naturalism, or at least presenting in an exacerbated manner his main facial characteristics (Figs. 21, 22). In both cases, the tögag is folded on its right side.

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

A third silver-gilt portrait made in his memory shortly after his death in 1786 shows him sitting on a lotus pedestal with more idealized features than in the two previous examples (Fig. 23). In this portrait, which we are historically certain was done postmortem, the tögag is folded on the left side of his body.

A key figure in the history of China's policy towards Tibet and Mongolia, Rolpai Dorje was a close friend of Emperor Qianlong from their youth. The latter is known to have on many anniversaries or special events commissioned the realization of quasi-industrial series of Buddhist images. The most widespread of these are undoubtedly the innumerable *Amitāyus* (Fig.24), some of which bear their dates of completion those of 1761 and 1771, which seem to be the most widespread.

Fig. 24

Fig. 25

Fig. 26

In this great movement of mass production, very numerous representations of Rolpai Dorje with or without headdresses were produced, most probably also in series on imperial orders (Fig.25). All present it with the tögag folded down on the right side, although many of them were probably executed during the nineteenth century.

Fig. 27

A sculpture dating from 1778 shows Rolpai Dorje with the tögag closed on the right side, which seems logical for a representation made during the subject's lifetime, but resting on a lotus pedestal, which seems to contradict the above-mentioned iconographic convention. (Fig.26) This may indicate that in the eighteenth century the workshops of the imperial court, which had to be familiar with Buddhist iconographic canons, did not or no longer adhere to the convention that only deceased lamas were represented on lotus pedestals. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the same workshops produced thousands of images of Tsongkhapa sitting on a lotus with the tögagfolded under his right arm even though he had been dead for several centuries (Fig.27). However, it could be that Rolpai Dorje, being the third in a great lineage of reincarnations, was considered a deity during his lifetime, which would justify a representation on a lotus pedestal.

Fig. 28

The quasi-industrial production of the Buddhist sculptures commissioned by Emperor Qianlong during his long reign also had an equivalent in paintings. At the heart of this immense production of the various imperial workshops, the portraits of masters are very numerous. Many representations of Rolpai Dorje (Fig.28), which would have been the central subject of the series, traditionally show him seated on a throne with the tögag folded down on the right side. When these thangkas are dated, it is always during his lifetime. On these thangkas, the

treatment of the face tends to be more realistic than usual in the painted portraits of Tibetan masters. This is probably due to the fact that many artists of the imperial workshops were more or less influenced by the realist style developed by the Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) who in 1716 became the official court painter under the Chinese name of Lang Shining. All these portraits of Rolpai Dorje seem to reproduce a fixed archetype of the master's figure, declined in several different series of paintings of which he was to be the central figure.

As mentioned above, this realist tendency undoubtedly finds its source in the famous portraits of Emperor Qianlong (1711-1796) wearing a Tibetan lama dress as an emanation of Manjushri (Fig.29). On these portraits, which must have been made during the Emperor's lifetime, the tögag is also represented folded under the right arm. Everything in these paintings is characteristic of the style of the Lamaic painters of the Chinese imperial court, with the exception of the face of the emperor, which is imbued with a very great realism, identical to that found in the portraits of emperors or members of the court by the Italian Jesuit painter Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766). The absolute similarity of the features of the imperial face from one painting to another seems to imply that there was an archetype, probably made by Castiglione, which was then perfectly reproduced by the artists of the imperial workshops on each painting made. (Fig.30)


Fig. 29


Fig. 30


Fig. 31

These imperial portraits seem to have been carried out for the various sanctuaries dependent on the court, but also to be used as diplomatic gifts as attested by the one still in place today at the Potala of Lhasa which could have been part of a consignment of gifts intended for the 8th Dalaï Lama. (Fig.31).

Beyond mere diplomatic potential, the painting kept at the Freer Gallery in Washington (Fig.32) bears an inscription that reveals the extremely political character of these works. This inscription proclaims Manjushri to be the ruler of the Buddhist faith. Insofar as the emperor is represented as an emanation of Manjushri, he thus positions himself de facto as ruler of Tibet and Mongolia, which were then administered by a system led by Buddhist monks.

These imperial portraits were undoubtedly intended to position the emperor above the Tibetan hierarchs, whose wide distribution of portraits and lineages also had a political purpose.


Fig. 32


Fig. 33


Fig. 34

A large portrait of the third Panchen Lama Lobsang Yeshe (*Blo-bzang Dpal-ldan Ye-shes*) (1738-1780) painted on silk (Fig.33) shows him sitting on a throne with the tögag passing under his right arm. The very particular and very realistic treatment of the face in this painting, which strongly reminds us of the Emperor Qianlong we have just mentioned, can only be due to a painter of the imperial court who had the model in front of him. This implies that it must have been carried out in 1779-1780 during the Panchen Lama's stay at the imperial court in Beijing, where he died of smallpox in 1780. Since Giuseppe Castiglione himself died in 1766, the face on this large silk painting must have been executed by one of his Chinese disciples or perhaps Ignaz Sichelbarth, the last Jesuit court painter trained by him still alive at the time, since he died in October 1780. Interestingly, as with the portraits of the emperor, the facial features of the Panchen Lama are identical to those found in portraits made at the same time by the imperial workshops of the Xumi Fushou (Fig. 34), the imposing building erected in Chengde by order of Emperor Qianlong to house the lama during his 1779-80 visit.

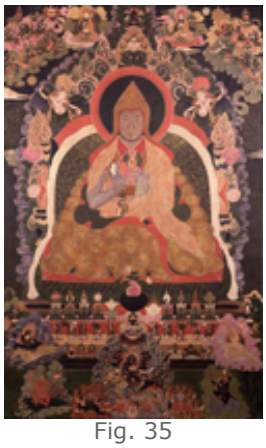
Fig. 35

We can therefore deduce that the imperial workshops had to have one or more models that the best artists could perfectly reproduce on the stereotyped paintings.

An important portrait of Lhawang Gyaltsen (*lha dbang rgyal mtshan*), the fourth Demo Rinpoche (*de mo rin po che*) (1631-1668), dated by inscription to 1667 (Fig.35), thus during his lifetime, shows him with the tögag passing by on the right side. Although it predates the arrival of Giuseppe Castiglione and the Jesuits in China, it presents a more realistic facial treatment than normal in Tibetan art. The author of this face was probably a Chinese artist versed in the art of classical ancestor portraiture, knowing how to play with chromatic variations to give the illusion of the natural shape of skin tones.

These few thangkas from Chinese workshops perfectly illustrate the limit to be granted to the notion of "portrait" in Tibetan painting. The analysis of the portraits of Emperor Qianlong and the third Panchen Lama highlights the stylistic opposition between the realistic treatment of the faces and the rest of the compositions, which systematically takes up the classical schemes of idealized representations of deities simply replaced by lamas who are themselves de facto divinized.

The confrontation of Emperor Qianlong's painting as a Tibetan lama with a thangka representing the 5th Dalaï Lama painted during his lifetime (Fig. 36), to which we shall return later, or a "portrait" of Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa executed at least a

century after his death (Fig. 37) shows the idealized character of the facial features in both Tibetan paintings.


Fig. 36


Fig. 37


Fig. 38

Probably because its origins go back essentially to Indian archetypes, Tibetan painting seeks to render the expressions of bodies and faces essentially by line drawing rather than by a subtle rendering of a modeled in shades of color. It is therefore an expression closer to colored drawing than to painting in the classical sense of the term. Since facial characteristics could only be rendered by particular features associated with each master, such as haircutting, the presence or absence of a beard, the shape of the nose or chin, which the artists sought to highlight for a quick identification of the models represented, many of these portraits quickly ended up tending towards absolute idealization or caricature in the Western sense of the term (Fig.38).

This supports the Jane Casey Singer's theory [14] that (at least as far as painting is concerned and that we do not take into account the portraits from the Chinese imperial workshops mentioned above) there is no real Tibetan portrait.

If, at this point, it is possible to consider that the portraits with the tögag under the left arm are systematically post-mortem commemorative representations, can the portraits with the tögag under the right arm all be considered as executed during the model's lifetime?

What seems to have been well defined on ancient paintings and sculptures has a priori started to become less absolute in a progressive way from the fifteenth century.


Fig. 39

A large thangka representing the 5th Dalaï Lama attributable to Tsangpa Choying Gyatso (*Gtsang pa chos dbyings rgya mtsho*) who would have been active from the 1620s to 1665, or from his workshop, can be historically dated to the 1650s (Fig.39). Tsangpa Choying Gyatso is known to have been one of the favorite artists of the first Panchen Lama and to have also incidentally worked for the 5th Dalaï Lama [15]. The details for dating the work were published by Tarub Kumar Jain [16]. The 5th Dalaï Lama, alive at the time of the work's creation, occupies the center of the composition, seated on cushions, with the tögag folded under his right arm. The Panchen Lama Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*) (1570-1662), living at the time of the work's creation, can be identified in the upper part of the composition, sitting on a cushion with the flap of the tögag passing under his right arm. In the lower part, the lama making the offering of the mandala, who must logically have been alive at the time of the consecration of the painting, is also depicted with the tögag folded down under his right arm.

In the upper left corner, however, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) sits in the heart of a lotus and also has the tögag folded under his right arm. Yet, as with the portraits of the Kagyupa masters mentioned above (Fig.9), many early posthumous paintings depicting Tsongkhapa show him with the tögag flap passing under his left arm (Fig.40).


Fig. 40


Fig. 41


Fig. 42

A large thangka painted on silk preserved in Tashilunpo, bearing an inscription designating it as made by Choying Gyatso (Fig.41) shows the first Panchen Lama, Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen (1570-1662) at the center of the composition surrounded by the lineage of ancient masters of whom he is supposed to be a reincarnation. It rests on a lotus, the tögag folded under the right arm. Note the characteristic hat very close to the one that was once his, a rare relic that was offered by the 13th Dalaï Lama Thubten Gyatso (1876-1933) in 1932/1933 to Prince Minchur (Fig.42).

These two portraits from an almost "governmental" workshop representing two of the most important dignitaries of their time come once again to question our logic of the sense of closure of the tögag. Indeed, in the portrait of the Great Fifth, Tsongkhapa, long dead at the time, is shown on a lotus with the tögag folded under his right arm. In the same way, in the second painting, the Panchen Lama rests on a lotus, but also wears the tögag closed under his right arm.

This contradiction between the seat and the closing side of the tögag also appears in some sculpted portraits of the first Panchen Lama, clearly identifiable by his facial features and inscriptions (Fig.43). It could also be, as mentioned above for a 1778 portrait of Rolpai Dorje (Fig.26), that to assert the political will of the 5th Dalaï Lama to impose this lineage of incarnations in Tsang province, Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen could have been represented during his lifetime in both sculpture and painting in a deified form resting on a lotus that would have been perpetuated. In Mongolia, for example, the workshop of Zanabazar (1635-1723), between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, produced portraits of Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen or even of Tsongkhapa sitting on lotuses with the tögag folded under their right arm (Fig.44).


Fig. 43


Fig. 44


Fig. 45

It should however be noted that this iconographic variation is not of an absolute fixity, since other portraits of this same first Panchen Lama present him resting on cushions with the tögag folded under his left arm. (Fig.45). But perhaps when he is represented on cushions he is then not considered a deity, but simply a master.

Beyond this possible will to represent a living lama in a divinized form, the attenuation of the old logic on the closing side of the donkha and lotus pedestals could be attributed to several factors.

Before considering these potential factors, insofar as the above examples seem to be mostly related to the Gelugpa school, it might seem wise to look at a few portraits from other schools. The most remarkable and relevant of them seem to appear among the Sakyapa who experienced one of the most brilliant artistic productions in the Tibetan art history. The wall paintings of Shalu (*zhwa lu*), for example, show us at the beginning of the fourteenth century commemorative portraits of masters resting on lotuses with the tögag folded down on the left side (Fig.46). Commemorative portraits of Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (*ngor chen kun dga' bzang po*) (1382-1456) and his lineage dating back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also show him on lotuses with the tögag closed on the left side (Fig.47).


Fig. 46


Fig. 47


Fig. 48

Also among the Sakyapa, a famous series of portraits tracing a lineage of transmission of the lamdre (*lam 'bras*) is generally dated around 1600, since the last master to appear there would be the 13th abbot of the Ngor monastery, Drangti Namkha Palzang (*brang ti nam mkha' dpal bzang*) (1532-1602). (Fig.48) On all these thangkas, when the main subjects, most of whom have been dead for a very long time, are dressed in tögags, these are systematically folded on the right side. This could demonstrate that this new iconographic vision of the deceased lamas spread well during the sixteenth century in all the artistic traditions of Tibet.


Fig. 49

The first of the potential factors for this could be the clearly attested tradition in Tibetan art, both in sculpture and painting, which is the replica of older models, including those possibly executed during the subject's lifetime that may simply have been adapted on lotuses.

Beyond the pure replication or readaptation of archetypes, another phenomenon to be taken into consideration is the existence of matrixes or moulds (Fig.49) that have made it possible to multiply over time, almost identically, particularly venerated portraits of

masters preserved in their original monasteries, and to disseminate them to accompany the geographical and political expansion of the great religious foundations.

We will retain here only two examples among many others to try to illustrate this practice.

The first consists of a few sculptures from a larger corpus representing Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen (*dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan*) (1292-1361) (Figs.50 and 51), and the second of a few examples showing Marpa (*mar pa chos kyi blo gros*) (1012-1097) (Fig.52).

Fig. 50

Fig. 51

Fig. 52

In both cases, we are faced with works that present only minimal differences in dimensions that seem to be essentially related to variations in the height of the lotus pedestals or cushions. In both series, the general shape and the folds of the garments are identical and the latter present variations only in their more or less developed treatment. It would seem that the finishes and details of chasing and precious metal inlays varied according to the inspiration of the artists and mostly according to the financial means of the sponsors.

Fig. 53

Careful examination of the front and back details of Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsen's portraits reveals small differences in the treatment of the details of the lotus pedestal, hat and clothing, which imply that these were not clearly printed in the mold or matrix, and that the artists had to copy them from an original or from drawings.

One will also note that this portrait of Marpa constitutes an archetype which was multiplied almost identically through series of thangkas presenting him with his characteristic hairstyle, the hands falling down on the knees, and the right foot coming out of the garment. (Fig.53).

Another explanation which could possibly bring a simple answer would be that many artists who were not aware of this tradition have, even when copying ancient

archetypes, judged abnormal the position of the flap of the tögag of their model and have corrected it in the direction which seemed most logical to them, namely the one they could observe in their daily life, on them or around them. A probable example of such an intentional modification of an archetype is the replica executed in 1961 of a painting illustrating the life of the lama Dolpo Sonam Lodrö (*bsod nams blo gros*) (1516-1581) (Fig.54). The original, probably executed at the end of the sixteenth century, shows him in the center of the composition, seated on a lotus pedestal with the tögag closed under his left arm. The combination of the two clues, combined with the biographical theme, therefore totally pleads in favor of a posthumous portrait. In 1961, the scholar-painter Dechen Labrang Lama (*bde chen bla brang bla ma*) tried to make a replica as close as possible of the original, making only one real modification, namely, the closing direction of the tögag.


Fig. 54


Fig. 55


Fig. 56

The same problem is highlighted by a portrait of Wangchuk Dorje (*dbang phyug rdo rje*) (1556-1603), the 9th Karmapa. (Fig.55). The inscription indicates that it was made by Chöying Dorje (*chos dbyings rdo rje*) (1604-1674), the 10th Karmapa. The work is quite characteristic of the style generally attributed to Chöying Dorje and although we are certain that the subject was deceased at the time of its execution, the flap of the tögag here passes under his right arm. This is possibly due to the same natural reflex of the artist as in the previous painting. One can also consider that, since this is a lineage of reincarnations, the tenth Karmapa could have considered that his predecessor never died since he was reincarnated in him. It should be noted that in his self-portraits, Choying Dorje depicts himself with the tögag folded down on the right side (Fig.56).

If on some lineage thangkas, all the lamas resting on lotuses present the tögag folded on the left side (Fig.57), on others on the other hand, although they are seated on lotuses, the closing sides of the tögag are opposite and sometimes even follow the direction of the faces (Fig.58). Since the inscriptions allow us to identify the four masters represented in this painting, it is absolutely certain that they were all deceased at the time of the realization of this series. This example could perhaps be the expression of a simple aesthetic will to harmonize the composition.


Fig. 57


Fig. 58

Another factor that probably favored the alteration of the tradition of placing the flap of the tögag under the right or left arm, mainly in painting, is undoubtedly the use of xylographic models.

It is well known that in ancient times, artists were in possession of sketchbooks in which different models were represented, allowing them to reproduce the features of this master or this deity. The most famous of these sketchbooks is undoubtedly that of a Nepalese artist named Jivarama, whose inscriptions reveal that it was completed in 1435. [17] The general style of these drawings corresponds to the highest artistic standards of the period by synthesizing the best of the Nepalese style and the Chinese influences then widespread in Tibet. Two pages of this sketchbook present studies of portraits of lamas belonging essentially to the lineage of the abbots of Densatil showing that Jivarama must have worked at the court of the Lang Phagmo Drupa (*rlangs phag mo 'gru pa*) clan which was then shining with its last fires (Fig.59 and 60).

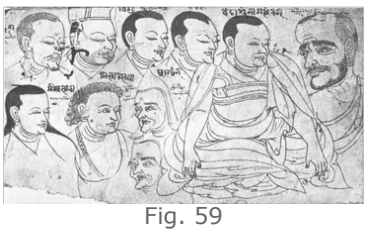
Fig. 59

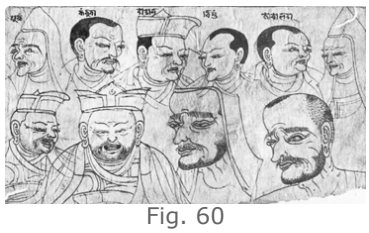
Fig. 60

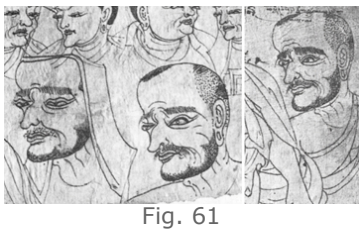
Fig. 61

We recognize several times Dorje Gyalpo Phagmo Drupa and Jigten Gonpo (*'jig rten mgon po*) (1143-1217) who are systematically represented with the tögag folded under the left arm. Sonam Gyaltsen Pel Zangpo (*bsod nams rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po*) (1386-1434) fourteenth abbot of Densatil is represented three times in a very realistic way. He is unfortunately still depicted there with a light garment leaving the right shoulder bare and therefore without tögag (Fig.61).

The text does not indicate how long Jivarama stayed in Tibet, but it would be conceivable that the artist may have physically met the 14th abbot portrayed in his sketchbook.

If such a sketchbook has come down to us it's because most of the artists must have had similar ones.

However, it seems that the development of xylography from the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries may have been at the origin of the progressive disappearance of such sketchbooks. Soon, printed books, simply

illustrated with black and white vignettes sometimes slightly enhanced with color, supplanted the old manuscripts magnificently illuminated.


Fig. 62

A book whose plates were engraved during the first half of the fifteenth century since it was made at the time of Sonam Gyaltsen Pel Zangpo, collected in Tibet by Professor Tucci presents on the first pages a series of portraits of masters probably linked to the diffusion or study of the text. A series of abbots from Densatil Monastery can be seen here, including *Phag mo gru pa* (1110-1170), *Grags pa rin chen* (1250-1310), *Grags pa rgyal mtshan* (1293-1360), *Grags pa shes rab* (1310-1370), *Grags pa byang chub* (1356-1386), and *Bsod nams grags pa* (1359-1408). The first five let us clearly observe the tögag folded down on the left side, following the ancient tradition, while on the sixth, it passes on the right side. (Fig.62). We can consider here that the engraver was inspired by a drawing in an illuminated manuscript during his lifetime, which could justify the direction of closure of the tögag. Once thus almost definitively fixed by engraving and multiplied by printing, such an image could be recopied again by artists over time.

One of the first and most popular examples of this power of diffusion and thus of the fixation of iconography by dissemination as early as the fifteenth century is probably the decision by Tsang Nyön Heruka (*gtsang smyon he ru ka*) (1452-1507), author of Milarepa's biography, to have copies of thangkas made to send them to Western Tibet, but above all to ask his disciple *Bsod nams grud pa* to disseminate illustrations of them throughout Tibet by means of xylographic plates [18]. The archetypes thus created around Milarepa were also diffused through the illustrations of the edition of the biography of Tsang Nyön himself, written by his disciple Gotsang Repa (*rgod tsang pa he ru ka*) at the beginning of the sixteenth century. (Fig.63).


Fig. 63


Fig. 64

To fully understand the power of iconographic and stylistic fixation of these xylographic works, one need only compare the two editions of the Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*) made in Beijing in 1410 and 1737. (Fig.64) Although the two editions are three hundred and twenty-seven years apart, one cannot help but notice how the engravers of the eighteenth century faithfully reproduced the models of their distant predecessors. It should also be noted that the 1410 edition was engraved after a manuscript Tibetan edition made in Narthang (*snar thang*) between 1312 and 1320. This point also highlights the problem of the permanence of certain styles through the multiple replicas executed over time throughout the Tibetan world.

Fig. 65

If woodblock printing (xylography) allowed the rapid diffusion of the texts, one should not lose sight of the fact that many thangkas are in fact only colored woodblock prints printed on sized canvas or faithful replicas of these same prints.

A good example illustrating the power of diffusion and therefore of the fixation of iconography by xylographic prints is for example that of Zanabazar (1635-1723), the first Mongolian Jetsun Dampa (*rje btsun dam pa*) represented cutting meat. (Fig. 65).

The most remarkable examples are undoubtedly the two famous series illustrating the lineages of reincarnations of the Panchen and Dalaï Lamas.

These series are insofar very interesting as they include incarnations prior to the creation of the masters lineages. These earlier incarnations are the fruit of the visions of the 5th Dalaï Lama and shed light on the religious but essentially political aims of the “Great Fifth” through his choices.

When fixing the previous incarnations of his own lineage, he naturally started it with the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, thus affirming the tradition going back to Gedun Drub (*dge ‘dun grub pa*) (1391-1475), Tsongkhapa's nephew and first Dalaï Lama posthumously. In the biography dedicated to him in 1494 Gedun Drub was presented as such [19], to justify the creation of the first line of reincarnations of the Gelugpa school in order to counterbalance the prestige of the three lines already existing within the Karma Kagyu school. One should not lose sight of the fact that from the middle of the fifteenth to the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, Tibet found itself in a kind of civil war opposing the provinces of Ü and Tsang, supporting the Gelug and Karma-Kagyu schools respectively.

Then come the Indian king Konchog Bang, the great Tibetan king of the seventh century Songtsen Gampo to whom is attributed the diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, himself considered as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara, and Dromtön, the disciple of Atiśa who was at the origin of the Kadampa school reformed into Gelugpa by Tsongkhapa. The next two personalities who preceded Gedun Drub in the lineage are Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (*kun dga’ snying po*) (1092-1158), the first of the five founding fathers of the Sakyapa school in the twelfth century, and Phagpa (*‘phags pa*) (1235-1280), whose proximity to Kubilai Khan enabled the Sakyapas to obtain the political leadership of Tibet during the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century. The very political nature of the integration of these two abbots is evident in that the Dalaï Lamas were renewing history, with the Tibetans providing spiritual assistance to the Mongols in return for support in temporal matters. It was the support of Gushri khan and his troops that enabled the 5th Dalaï Lama to reunify Tibet in 1642.

The artistic apotheosis of this self-divinization by the creation of this mythical lineage is undoubtedly expressed through a series of paintings today incomplete

realized during his lifetime since carrying prayers intended to ensure him a long life. [20]. The central painting now in the Guimet Museum in Paris represents the “Greath Fifth” with the tögag folded down on the right side of his body (fig.66). He is surrounded by four gilded footprints and handprints (a priori his own) supported by crossed vajras, which would be symbols of immutability and thus long life. These footprints and handprints, echoing the classic representations of Buddha footprints common in ancient India, naturally reinforce the divine character of the lineage, the political side of the series being indicated in the scene taking place at the foot of his throne. Indeed, one can see there the illustration of one of the two visits in Lhasa of the Mongol Gushri Khan coming to pay homage to him. All previous incarnations are also framed by his footprints and handprints. (Fig.67).


Fig. 66


Fig. 67


Fig. 68

Two thangkas that may come from the same or absolutely identical series (Fig.68) show us the first and fourth Dalaï Lamas with the tögag folded down on the right side of the bodies, which for works that had to be created in official workshops makes it almost impossible for the artists to make mistakes, and argues in favor of associating this iconography with the divine character of the lineage of reincarnations.

The 4th Dalaï Lama had given the title of Panchen Lama to his master Lobzang Chökyi Gyaltsen, who was already part of an existing tulku lineage, going back to one of Tsongkhapa's favorite disciples. His three predecessors were thus posthumously integrated into the lineage of the Panchen Lamas, recognized as incarnations of Amitābha. *The spiritual pre-eminence thus conferred on the abbot of Tashilunpo was in principle to keep him away from temporal affairs. The aim was to leave political power in the hands of the* Dalaï *Lama as a force acting on the world.* [21]

This will to fix a purely spiritual character on the lineage of the Panchen Lamas is well indicated in the choices of the distant previous incarnations visualized by the 5th Dalaï Lama. Unlike his choices for his own lineage, none of the distant masters of the Panchen Lama lineage is truly political in character.

The original of the famous series of xylographic plates illustrating the lineage of the incarnations of the Panchen Lamas would have been engraved in Narthang (*Snar thang*) in the eighteenth century. This technique of printing favored the wide diffusion of what then became archetypes throughout all the territories practicing Tibetan Buddhism.

The first version of this series was designed to trace the lineage back to Lobsang Yeshe (*Blo bzang ye shes*) (1663-1737), the second historical Panchen Lama, and fifth in the tradition established by the 5th Dalaï Lama. This initial series, published by Professor Tucci, consisted of twelve plates. The central plate depicting the

second Panchen Lama was surrounded by eleven compositions presenting his previous incarnations. (Fig.69).

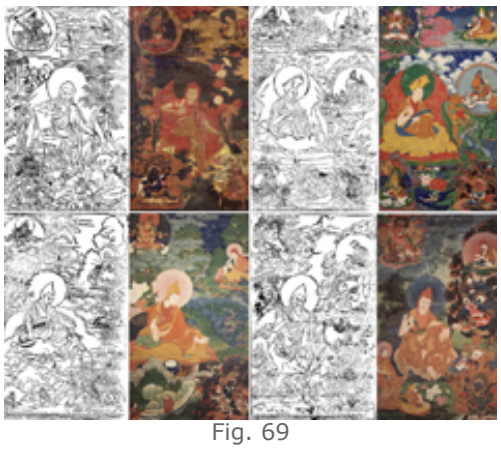
Fig. 69


Fig. 70

On all these plates of the original series, the characters dressed in a tögag wear it closed under the left arm. Lobsang Yeshe, the main subject of the central composition of the series also presents the tögag folded under the left arm which would logically be an indicator that this is a commemorative post-mortem portrait. (Fig.70).

This would imply that this commemorative series was engraved between the death of the Panchen Lama and the recognition of his next incarnation, around 1737-1738.

A few years later, two additional plates were added to the series, a central one depicting the 3rd Panchen Lama Lobsang Palden yeshe (*blo-bzang Dpal-ldan Ye-shes*) (1738-1780) in frontal position (Fig. 71) and another depicting the 2nd Panchen Lama from the side (Fig. 72), to be added at one end when the complete series was exhibited. On this last plate, the lama is represented with the tögag passing under the right arm, thus breaking with the logic of previous representations. The example presented here is not a painted version, but an embroidered version of which several series were made between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.


Fig. 71


Fig. 72


Fig. 73


Fig. 74

Two other plates were added to the series, one showing the 4th Panchen Lama Palden Tenpai Nyima (*dpal ldan bstan pa'i nyi ma*) (1782-1853) in a frontal position (Fig.73), and another to be added at one end during the exhibition of the complete series showing the third Panchen Lama from the side (Fig.74). The latter is represented with the tögag passing under the right arm, continuing the break with the logic of the initial series of twelve plates.

The diffusion and reproduction of these models is also at the origin of series


Fig. 75

synthesizing several original plates into one, probably with the aim of reducing the number of thangkas in the sets. (Fig.75)

This use of xylographic plates has allowed the diffusion of archetypes throughout the lamaist world to the point of creating a kind of stylistic unity that now excludes almost all regional subtilities. The Chinese rubbings thus take again for example exactly the same iconographic elements with the exception of the border. (Fig.76).


Fig. 76

This series to the glory of the Panchen Lamas and their previous incarnations thus seems to have originated around 1737-1738, a historically troubled period in Tibet, during which Polhané Sönam Topgyé (*pho lha nas bsod nams stobs rgyas*) (1689-1747) was in a way the "Prince - Regent" of Tibet, established by the Emperor of China since 1728. During this period, the Tibetan government he led seems to have sought to rely on the spiritual prestige of the Panchen Lama, since in 1735, after eight years of exile, the seventh Dalaï Lama Kelzang Gyatso (*bskal bzang rgya mtsho*) (1708-1757) had been stripped of all political power.

A second series of xylographic plates depicting the Dalaï Lamas and their previous incarnations seems to have been created after the death of Polhané Sönam Topgyé in 1747 and perhaps even after 1751, when the Dalaï Lama regained power by abolishing the office of regent of Tibet.

One of the most complete versions derived from these plates is undoubtedly the set of thirteen thangkas printed on yellow silk kept at the Tibet House Museum in New Delhi. (Fig.77).

Kelzang Gyatso occupies the central composition of this series of 13 portraits (Fig.78). The other twelve plates represent his previous incarnations. Among those wearing a tögag, only Gedun Drub (1391-1474) the first Dalaï Lama wears it passing under his left arm.


Fig. 77


Fig. 78

A comparison of the two series, Dalaï and Panchen Lamas, shows that from the middle of the eighteenth century, with the diffusion of new archetypes by means of woodblock prints, the representations with the tögag folded under the left arm almost disappeared or became a minority and random.

Another famous series of fifteen xylographic plates engraved by *'Jam dbyangs bzad pa* in Tashilunpo was also devoted to 203 episodes from the life of

Tsongkhapa. (Fig.79).

This series would have been commissioned by Polhané Sönam Topgyé between 1727 and 1747. [22] On all the plates, Tsongkhapa occupies the center of the composition, seated in the heart of a blooming lotus, the tögag folded down on the right side.

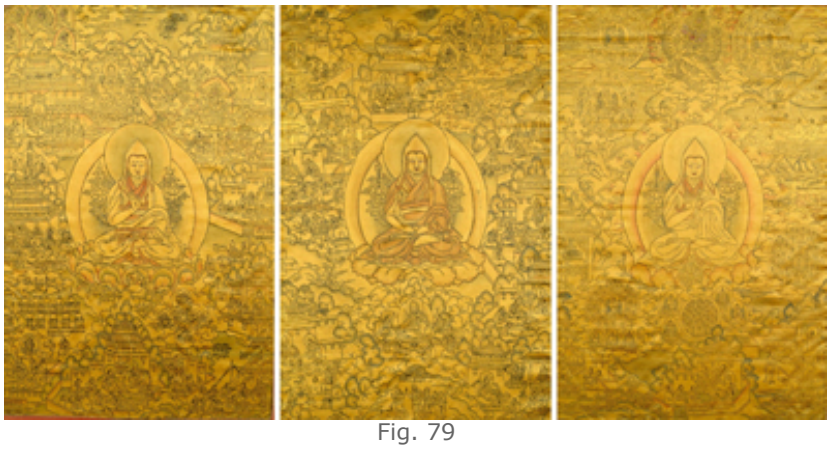

Fig. 79

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the anonymous painter named Khazi lazo after the name of the place where he lived in Khams produced a series of seven thangkas dedicated to the incarnations of the first nine Dalaï Lamas (Fig.80). This series was the subject of a detailed study by Per K. Sorensen in the catalog of the exhibition "*The Dalaï Lamas - The 14 Reincarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*" held in Zurich in 2005. [23]

Fig. 80

Curiously, the 5th Dalaï Lama is enthroned in the heart of the central thangka surrounded by his four predecessors and their previous incarnations. The 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th Dalaï Lamas are shown in miniature, resting on clouds above the “Great Fifth”. This iconographic curiosity implies that Khazi Lazo must have been inspired by an already existing series, which he reproduced by adapting it with his specific style, and having no model for the next four arranged the four miniatures at the top of the central painting.

The logic, however, would have been to create a thangka presenting the 9th Dalaï Lama enthroned from the front on the thangka to occupy from now on the center of the series and to arrange the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth on paintings intended to be hung on the sides.

Of the historical Dalaï Lamas arranged on the side thangkas, the First, Third, Fourth and Fifth Dalaï Lamas wear the tögag folded over on the left side, indicating


Fig. 81

that the original series that inspired Khazi Lazo must have been created shortly after the death of the “Great Fifth” in 1682.

Examination of the miniatures of the four Dalaï Lamas, arranged on clouds and identified by inscriptions, reveals that three have the tögag folded down on the left side, and that the ninth, Lungtok Gyatso (*lung rtogs rgya mtsho*) (1805-1815), is the only one to wear it closed on the right side, a probable indication that this series was executed during his lifetime, that is, before 1815. (Fig.81).

The idealization of the subject here is absolutely certain, insofar as he is represented as an adult master when he died shortly after his ninth birthday.

During the twentieth century, with the diffusion of photographs, the representations of the Dalaï and Panchen Lamas tended, at least for the treatment of faces, towards absolute realism. (Fig.82 & Fig.83). In all cases, the tögag is represented passing on the right side.


Fig. 82


Fig. 83

The analysis of these few examples highlights the fact that there seems to be an old convention that has more or less fallen into oblivion over time, according to which commemorative and thus post-mortem portraits of Tibetan masters had to present the flap of the donkha closed on the left side of the bodies.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that almost all portraits with the tögag folded to the left seem to be posterior to the subject's death.


Fig. 84

We can however note some potential exceptions for which it is nevertheless possible to put forward some plausible explanations. A silver portrait depicting once again the 6th Shamar Rinpoche with the tögag passing under his left arm (Fig. 84) bears an ambiguous inscription translated by H. Uebach and J. L. Panglung as follows: “*Reverence to the portrait of the Gyalwa [Shamarpa], the sixth bearer of the head ornament, the Red Hat, the glorious Garchen Chökyi Wangchuk, the statue blessed by the lord himself with [grains of] barley.*” [24] This is very surprising, as

this would be one of the very few examples where the closing side of the tögag and the meaning of the inscription would be contradictory. A logical explanation could be that the "Lord himself" designated in the inscription could be the 7th incarnation of Shamar Rinpoche who was intrinsically the same person.


Fig. 85

A portrait considered to represent Sonam Gyatso (1543-1588), the third Dalaï Lama, shows him seated on a lotus pedestal, with the tögag passing under his left arm, two indicators that in the absolute sense make it impossible to imagine that it could be a portrait made during his lifetime. (Fig.85). However, the inscription would describe it as "*an image of Sonam Gyatso, the noble omniscient incarnation of the Buddha, in his forty-second year*," which would date the work to 1585. [25]

This mismatch between iconography and inscription could be related to two recurring phenomena in Tibetan art, namely: an inscription copied without reflection from another earlier portrait, or to a misinterpretation of the number since the end of the inscription giving the age had been judged impossible to read with precision when this work was first published by Armand Neven in 1975. The same author who was then able to examine the sculpture wondered if it could not have been rebased in China, which could raise several questions as to the real relationship between the sculpture and the inscription. [26]

If the portraits with the tögag folded down on the left side can thus be considered at least in their great majority as posthumous, we have seen above that, on the other hand, the tögag closed on the right side cannot unfortunately be considered (more specifically in painting) as an absolute indication of a portrait made during the subject's lifetime. The same is true with the lotus pedestals, which seem to have lost the old significant logic, along with the closing direction of the tögag.

In conclusion, if we can at least envisage with near-certainty that the representations of masters presenting the tögag folded under the left arm are posthumous, this detail could make it possible to propose dating limits for certain works when the subject or subjects are identified. We will dwell on a few examples that can illustrate this position before concluding with one that will allow us to consider the two senses of closure of the tögag, associated with other iconographic and historical elements, always with the aim of trying to clarify the date of the works.

The first of these examples is a thangka attributed to the 10th Karmapa Chöying Dorje (1604-1674) or to his workshop, today preserved by the Shamar Rinpoche. (Fig.86). It would represent Chöying Dorje himself surrounded by Gyaltsap Tulku (*rgyal tshab sprul sku*) (1659-1698) and Küntu Sangpo (*kun tu bzang po*) (1610-1684) in a cave. In his long and remarkable study of the works attributed to the 10th Karmapa, Karl Debreczny considers it most likely to be a painting executed in the twilight of his career. [27] Careful examination of the costumes of the three figures reveals that all three tögags are folded to the left side (Fig.87), which would imply that all were deceased at the time of creation, and that the painting was executed at the earliest in 1698, possibly as a memorial for the funeral of Gyaltsap Tulku.


Fig. 86


Fig. 87


Fig. 88

The comparison with the few paintings bearing clear indications that they are the work of Chöying Dorje's hand leads us to think that we are here in the presence of a studio work and therefore of a disciple rather than of the master. The meaning of the tögag here could indicate that the style attributed to Chöying Dorje lasted with his disciples at least until the last years of the seventeenth century or even the very first years of the eighteenth.

The second example could provide some clarification on the discussed dating of a series of mandalas from the Vajravali cycle that has been subject to dating variations between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries over the last forty-five years. (Fig.88)

These last years, following the reading of the inscriptions it appeared that the main represented lineages on these mandalas were Sakyapa and Phagmodrupa. On the basis of these identifications, John Huntington proposed a dating between 1417 and 1434 and a realization at Densatil. [28] He based this on the fact that the lama recurrently depicted in the center of the upper register of the series is identified as Sonam Gyaltsen, and that the 14th abbot of Densatil, for whom the 8th and last tashi gomang (*bkhra shis sgo mang)* was built, was named Sonam Gyaltsen Pel Zangpo (1386-1434) which appears several times in the Jivarama sketchbook mentioned above (Fig. 59,60,61). The majority of scholars, however, have identified the character as the famous Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltsen (1312-1375) of the Sakyapa school, in whose honor the series would have been created.


Fig. 89

On the mandala of Akshobhyavajra, the name of the donor shown at the bottom right is also identified. In proposing a reading of his name as *Chen-nga Chenpo*, Jeff Watt envisages that it is Dragpa Sherab (*Grags pa shes rab* 1310-1370), the 9th abbot of Densatil, who obtained the title of Chenga (*spyan snga*) by ascending to the abbot's throne. [29] This would imply that if he was the commissioner, the painting would have been executed before 1370, i.e. during Lama Dampa's lifetime, which is unlikely since the series would have been executed in his honor, i.e. after his death.

A portrait of Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltsen from a manuscript illumination shows him with his arms crossed in front of his chest holding the bell and the vajra, his head wearing a Vajracharya tiara, the tögag folded down on his right side. (Fig.89).

In the paintings of the series, on the other hand, he is always represented according to the same iconography, but each time with the tögag passing on his left side (Fig.90), which would thus imply that these mandalas are posthumous.


Fig. 90

If one wanted to persevere with Jeff Watt's reading of "Chenga chenpo", logic would suggest that it is rather Dragpa Changchub (*grags pa byang chub*) (1356-1386), who from 1374 to 1381 jointly occupied the abbatial throne of Densatil and that of Neudongtse Palace, that during this period was the most important status in Tibet, and to whom the superlative of *chen po* (great) would probably have been more logical.

David P. Jakson [30], taking up the transcript noted by P. Pal [31] "*sbyin bdag rdzong ji chen po*" identifies the donor as Dzongji Gyaltsen Zangpo (*rdzong ji ryal mtshan bzang po*), an obscure but influential figure of the Lang Phagmo Drupa (*rlangs phag mo gru pa)* clan at that time. Indeed, on the death of Shakya Gyaltsen (*Shakya rgyal mtshan*) (1340-1373) the leadership of the clan passed to the maternal uncles of the lineage who acted as ministers. Among these, the Dzongji Gyaltsen Zangpo seems to have occupied a predominant place within the clan by deciding on the attribution of the thrones of the three great political and religious centers of the dynasty which were Densatil, Tsethang and Neudongtse. He was responsible for the establishment of Dragpa Gyaltsen (*Grags pa rgyal mtshan*) (1374-1432) on the throne of Neudongtse Palace in 1385. His exact dates are not known, but his son Dzongji Dragpa Rinchen (*rdzong ji grags par in chen*) who seems to have succeeded him as Dzongji is said to have been murdered in 1399 [32].

It thus seems obvious that at the death of Lama Dampa Sonam Gyaltsen in 1375, Dzongji Gyaltsen Zangpo may have been the key man of the Phagmodrupa clan able to be one of the donors of this great series of mandalas. This confirms the probable dating of this remarkable ensemble, shortly after 1375.

A large thangka in the Los Angeles County Museum (Fig.91) shows two lamas of a same lineage sitting on a lotus pedestal. This particular iconography obviously refers to the ancient archetypes illustrating the mystical conversations between the historical Buddha and those of the past, or the adaptations made by the Tibetan abbots of the court of the Yuan Emperors, staging themselves in conversation with the Buddha. (Fig.92) This Los Angeles painting would present Kunga Wangchuk (*kun dha' dbang phyug*) (1424-1478), 4th abbot of Ngor monastery, and the 6th, Sonam Senge (*go rams pa bsod nams seng ge*) (1429-1489). Since both wear the tögag folded over to the left side, it is conceivable that the painting was made after 1489, and may have been done in the last years of the fifteenth century, perhaps as a memorial for Sonam Senge.


Fig. 91


Fig. 92


Fig. 93

Another thangka (Fig.93) using the same iconographic scheme presents a transmission between Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo (*ngor chen kun dga' bzang po)* (1382-1456) and Muchen Sangye Rinchen (*mus chen sangs rgyas rin chen*) (1450-1524), the 8th abbot of Ngor. [33] Both wearing the tögag folded down on the left side, we can consider this painting to have been executed as a memorial after the death of Muchen Sangye Rinchen in 1524.

The last examples bring us back to our starting point, namely the portraits of the 5th Dalaï Lama. These series of objects show how much the analysis of historical events and the taking into account of iconographic details should make it possible in certain cases to specify the date of execution of the works.

A thangka on a red background depicts the 5th Dalaï Lama surrounded by footprints and handprints (Fig.94).

His tögag is folded to the right, but we noted above that at that time this detail was no longer absolutely significant. Two iconographic details are visible on this painting. The first one is the presence of a phurbu slipped in his belt which appears on many other portraits of the same character (Fig.95). Only the end of the handle traditionally decorated with a triple head is usually visible on the works.


Fig. 94


Fig. 95


Fig. 96

The second is the portrait of a Nyingmapa master at the top of the composition (Fig.96).

This character has sometimes been quickly identified as Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gling pa*) (1646-1714) who was one of the greatest masters of the Nyingmapa school and founder of the great Mindroling (*smin grol gling*) Monastery in 1676, but above all one of the main "master and disciple" of the « Great Fifth ». [34] He was also one of the few outsiders to the Tibetan government who knew of the death of the Dalaï Lama, and was probably no stranger in the choice and recognition of the new incarnation. However, the detailed iconographic study, with a yogi hairstyle


Fig. 97

and a vase in the left hand, would further encourage the identification of this figure as Nyang Ral Nyima Ozer (*nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer*) (1124-1192) (Fig.97), the famous tertön (*gter ston*) who was included by the 5th Dalaï lama in the list of former incarnations of his lineage.

The ritual dagger at the belt and the representation of this Nyingmapa master at the top of the composition are a strong affirmation of the Nyingmapa origins of the "Great Fifth" and the interest he always had in their teachings. This is particularly well illustrated by the above-mentioned statuette from the Boston Museum (Fig. 3), which has long been regarded as a portrait of a Nyingmapa lama.

It is interesting to note the existence of another portrait on a red background following more or less the same iconographic scheme but depicting the 6th Dalaï Lama (Fig.98).


Fig. 98

The composition of this second painting is much the same as the first, with the lama on a throne, the tögag passing on the right side, surrounded by two bodhisattvas and foots and hands prints. A notable difference between the two paintings is the absence of a ritual dagger passed through the belt of the 6th Dalaï Lama. This is possibly due to the fact that the latter has never in its short existence developed a real attraction for religion. The top of the composition is once again occupied by Nyang Ral Nyima Ozer, thus marking a Nyingmapa filiation between the fifth and sixth incarnations of the lineage, all the stronger as the 6th Dalaï Lama was also from a Nyingmapa background.

We will not return here to the complex history of the 6th Dalaï Lama and the turmoil that troubled the history of Tibet at that time. However, considering that after his exile and assassination in 1706, the new rulers quickly began to take hostile measures against the Nyingmapas, who were also the object of violent repression during the invasion of the Dzungars in 1717, and that the seventh Dalaï Lama and his family never had any affinity with this school, it is unlikely that these two spiritually marked paintings could have been executed after 1706.

This form of censorship is perfectly illustrated by the absence of Nyang Ral Nyima Ozer, among the representations of previous incarnations fixed by the thirteen xylographic plates made in the mid-eighteenth century mentioned above. (Fig.77).

The presence of this famous tertön on the series painted at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Khazi Lazo mentioned above (Fig.99) could confirm that the original series that was to serve as his model can only date from before the anti-Nyingmapa censorship.

A surprising sculpture that would be clearly identified by inscription as a portrait of the 6th Dalaï Lama presents him with a phurbu passed at the belt. (Fig.100).


Fig. 99


Fig. 100


Fig. 101

Since the tögag closed on the left side could indicate a posthumous representation with a very high probability, it could be conceivable that the artist, possibly in charge of adding a sculpture to an already existing series, was inspired by a portrait of the “Great Fifth” holding a vase (bum pa) which is not one of his most common attributes. However, a thangka also on a red background showing the 5th Dalaï Lama clearly identified by inscription and the presence around him of his four previous historical incarnations following exactly the same iconography (Fig.101) could raise some questions about the reliability of the inscription of the sculpture or its reading. Failing to have access to this inscription, it would even be conceivable that the 6th Dalaï Lama could only be the commissioner of this portrait of his predecessor.

In the light of all this information, we might consider classifying the sculptures representing the "Great Fifth" into three distinct categories.

The first one, regrouping the portraits with the tögag closed on the right side and a phurbu passed at the belt, could be considered as the works realized during the lifetime of the "Great Fifth", i.e. until 1682, or at the latest until the official announcement of his death in 1697. (Fig.102)

The second category should include portraits with the phurbu passed at the belt and the tögag folded down to the left side, which could imply that they are portraits made between his death in 1682 and that of the 6th Dalaï Lama in 1706 or at the latest a few years later just before the great phase of anti-Nyingmapa censorship. (Fig.103)


Fig. 102


Fig. 103


Fig. 104

The third category finally, with tögag folded down on the left side and without ritual dagger at the belt should correspond to portraits after 1706 and more certainly after 1717. (Fig.104)

At this stage, it would also be essential to consider a fourth category that would include posthumous portraits with tögag folded down on the right side, and more or less faithful replicas of older originals.

Having reached this point, we realize that as is almost always the case with Tibetan art, nothing is ever simple, and every question that may seem resolved at first glance generates new ones. It seems obvious that the portraits that we are sure were made during the master's lifetime present them with the tögag folded down on the right side of the body, but that following the various possible considerations or interpretations mentioned above, deceased masters may have continued to be depicted following this iconography.

On the other hand, it seems that almost all the portraits in which the thögag is represented closed on the left side of the master's bodies correspond to posthumous portraits.

The consideration of this iconographic detail could therefore perhaps in many cases help art historians to refine the dating of certain works.

It is to be hoped that in the future, many portraits of masters from all schools with historical inscriptions will come to light to help refine this draft and clarify the still numerous obscure points.

Footnotes

1) Giuseppe Tucci: *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* Roma 1949 Vol; 1 p. 307.

2) Roerich, George N.: *The Blue Annals*. Dehli : Motilal Banarsidass, 1976 p. 569

3) Giuseppe Tucci: *To Lhasa and beyond*. Roma: Ist. Poligr. dello Stato. 1956 p. 128

4) Jane Casey Singer: *Early Portrait Painting in Tibet,* in: *Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art*. Proceedings of a seminar held at Leiden University, 21 – 24 October 1991 (ed. by Karel R. van Kooij and Henny van der Veere), Groningen 1995

5) Heather Stoddard: *Fourteen Centuries of Tibetan Portraiture*, in: *Portraits of the Masters. Bronze Sculptures of the Tibetan Buddhist Lineages* (ed. by Donald Dinwiddie), Chicago 2003

6) David P. Jackson: *Patron and Painter. Situ Panchen and the Revival of the Encampment Style*, New York, Seattle and London 2007

7) Rachel Q. Levy: *Portraits of Teachers – Rethinking the Role of Likeness in Tibetan Buddhist Art* in *Hermeneutik des Gesichts*, Berlin, Munich, Boston 2016

8) Ariane Macdonald, Dvags-po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho: *Un portrait du cinquième Dalaï-Lama* in « *Essais sur l'art du Tibet* » Paris 1977

9) Nathalie Bazin & Alii: *Rituels Tibétains – Visions secrètes du cinquième Dalaï Lama* Musée des arts asiatiques - Guimet du 5 novembre 2002 au 28 février 2003

pp 56,57.

10) Ariane Macdonald, Dvags-po Rinpoche and Yon tan rgya mtsho: *Un portrait du cinquième Dalaï-Lama* in « *Essais sur l'art du Tibet* » Paris 1977 pp 135 - 137

11) Special thanks are due to Trichen Rinpoche and His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon for confirming the exact name and spelling of this garment which is commonly referred to as dhonka, probably on a phonetic interpretation, in various publications dealing with Tibetan monastic costumes.

12) P. Pal: *Tibet Tradition and Change* Albuquerque Museum 1997

13) Amy Heller: *Arts et Sagesses du Tibet* Zodiaque 1999 p. 188

14) Jane Casey Singer: *Early Portrait Painting in Tibet*, in: Function and Meaning in Buddhist Art. Proceedings of a seminar held at Leiden University, 21 – 24 October 1991 (ed. by Karel R. van Kooij and Henny van der Veere), Groningen 1995

15) David P. Jackson: *History of Tibetan painting* Wien 1996 p. 27

16) Tarun Kumar Jain: *A lifetime portrait of the 5th Dalaï Lama* Navin Kumar Gallery 2016

17) John Huntington: *Nevar Artist Jïvarama's Sketchbook* in *Indian Art Treasures – Suresh Neotia Collection* Mosaic Books Varanasi 2006 pp 76-85

18) David P. Jackson: *History of Tibetan painting* Wien 1996 p.373

19) Ana Cristina O. Lopes, *Tibetan Buddhism in Diaspora: Cultural Re-signification in Practice and Institutions* Critical Studies in Buddhism, 2014, p. 64

20) David P. Jackson: *History of Tibetan painting* Wien 1996 p.204

21) Fabienne Jagou in Martin Brauen & Alii: *The Dalaï Lamas - The 14 Reincarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* Favre 2005. P. 202

22) Giuseppe Tucci : *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* Roma 1949 Vol; 1 pp. 417,418

23) Per K. Sorensen in Martin Brauen & Alii: *The Dalaï Lamas - The 14 Reincarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara* Favre 2005. pp. 242-257

24) H. Uebach and J. L. Panglung, "A Silver Portrait of the 6th Źwa-dmar Karma-pa (1584-1630)", in B. Kellner et al. eds. *Pramanakirtih*: *Papers Dedicated to Ernst Steinkellner on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, *Vol. II*, Vienna, 2007, p. 975-988.

25) Karenina Kollmar-Paulens in Martin Brauen & Alii: *The Dalaï Lamas - The 14 Reincarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara*Favre 2005. p. 59 fig 33

26) Armand Neven: *Art Lamaïque* Société Générale de Banque, Bruxelles 1975 n° 43 p.29

27) Karl Debreczeny: *The Black Hat Eccentric – Artistic visions of the tenth Karmapa* Rubin Museum of Art New York 2012 p.185

28) Huntington & Bangdel: *The Circle Of Bliss – Buddhist Meditational Art*, Serindia Publications 2003 p.

29) Jeff Watt: *Akshobyavajra Guhyasamaja Mandala*, Himalayan Art Resources, item n° 58302

30) David P. Jackson: *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting* Rubin Museum of Art New York 2010 p.133,134

31) P. Pal: *Tibet Tradition and Change* Albuquerque Museum 1997 p.147

32) Olaf Czaja: *Medieval Rule in Tibet The Rlangs Clan and the Political and Religious History of the Ruling House of Phag mo gru pa* Austrian Academy of Sciences Press 2014 p 18

33) David P. Jackson: *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting* Rubin Museum of Art New York 2010 p.31

34) P. Cornu in Bazin & Alii: *Rituels Tibétains – Visions secrètes du cinquième Dalaï Lama* Musée des arts asiatiques - Guimet du 5 novembre 2002 au 28 février 2003 p 36.