

The Dalai Lama's Secret Temple: Tantric Wall Paintings from Tibet

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Ian Baker, Photographer

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“Nowhere else are the esoteric practices of Tibet’s Tantric tradition so boldly illustrated, and nowhere else has Tibetan art achieved such an extraordinary synthesis of creativity and philosophical depth,” writes the author, referring to the murals in Lukhang Temple. Located on a small island near the thousand-roomed Potala Palace in Lhasa, it is the Dalai Lama’s private meditation chamber and has been for centuries.

According to current thinking during the 1600s the acting regent of both the Fifth and Sixth Dalai Lamas commissioned these vibrantly colored murals that are distinctive in style and content from all others in Tibetan art history. Unprecedented in their depiction of secret yogic teachings, which traditionally pass from teacher to student orally, the images and occasional inscriptions were until recently viewed solely by the incarnate Dalai Lamas.

Though the lower chamber of the temple was dismantled during the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the upper chamber was more or less undisturbed. It is this part of Lukhang that is beautifully documented in over 150 color, high resolution photographs. Although the text aims to make the images accessible, and thereby appreciable by a lay audience as well as an expert one, the author avoids presumptuous interpretation. Aware that the significance and meaning of the Lukhang murals cannot be fully articulated in words, the majority of the book is dedicated to the photographs and ink drawings that are best able to tell the story.

The present Dalai Lama now lives in exile in northern India, having never seen the real murals for himself, but it was with his blessings and encouragement that the author and photographer took on the project of documenting what remains of this sacred place.

This book is “offered as an object of contemplation which, through its resonant images, presents new modes of awareness and perception.” For those less familiar with the subject matter, a thorough glossary is included, though lack of familiarity should not be a barrier to awe at what is contained in these pages.

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (September / October 2000)

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