

An Aesthetical Study of Mongyu Monastery Murals, Ladakh

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ABSTRACT: Ladakh is one of the peculiar terrains of the world which still remains mystic due to its inaccessibility and solitude as cold dessert encircled by rugged and mighty ranges of Himalayas, though it was explored by Sir Alexander Cunningham in 1852. Ladakh appearing more Tibetan than Tibet attracted many adventurers and scholars in the field of Indo Tibetan studies. Mongyu is a small village in a narrow deep ravine of Ladakh situated on the left bank of river Indus near Alchi. The monastery of Mongyu is a complex of four temples, i.e., Byamschen Lhakhang (Avalokiteshvara temple), Thugs-rge-chen po Lhakhang (Assembly Hall), Nampar snag mdzad (Vairochana temple) and Jam-chung Lhakhang (Manjusri temple). Its antiquity indicates that it must have been constructed during the revival of Buddhism in Western Tibet. It contains large amount of rare wall paintings from eleventh-twelfth century that are among the most precious and prepossessing in existence today. Its statues and paintings embrace many unique works of art representing the ancient art from the formerly vital marveled Buddhist center of Kashmir. Stylistically they may be compared to the famous paintings of the early temples of Alchi to which the foundation of Mongyu is contemporaneous. The wall paintings are articulate documents that contribute in resolving the chronology of the paintings of Alchi too.

KEYWORDS: Ladakh, Monastery, Wall Paintings, Alchi, Himalayan Art

Introduction

Ladakh is one of the peculiar terrains of the world which still remains mystic due to its inaccessibility and solitude as cold dessert encircled by rugged and mighty ranges of Himalayas. Ladakh appearing more Tibetan than Tibet attracted many adventurers and scholars in the field of Indo Tibetan studies.

Mongyu is a small village in the western part of Ladakh, (3450 metres) in a narrow deep ravine on the left bank of river Indus near Alchi. The village itself is perched high above the river bed and there are remains of a few Chortens on the outskirts of the village. (Figure 1)

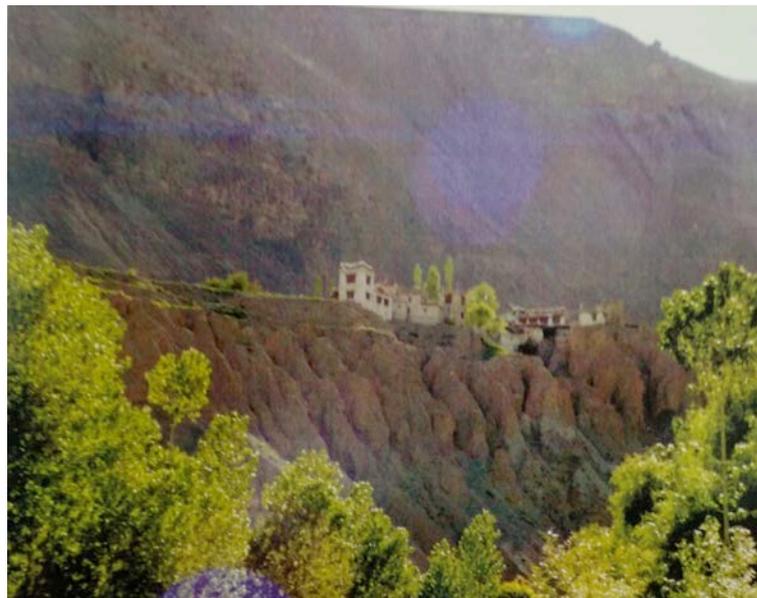


Figure 1. Mongyu Monastery

Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

The temple is associated with the other constructions said to be done by Rinchen bzang-Po. The temple site is known as Nampar Nangdza Gompa (Monastery of Vairochana). It consists of two temples and two towers forming a temple complex i.e., Byamschen Lhakhang (Avalokiteshvara temple), Thugje Chenpo Lhakhang (Assembly hall), Nampar snag mdzad (Vairochan temple) and Jam-chung Lhakhang (Manjushri temple). (Figure 2)

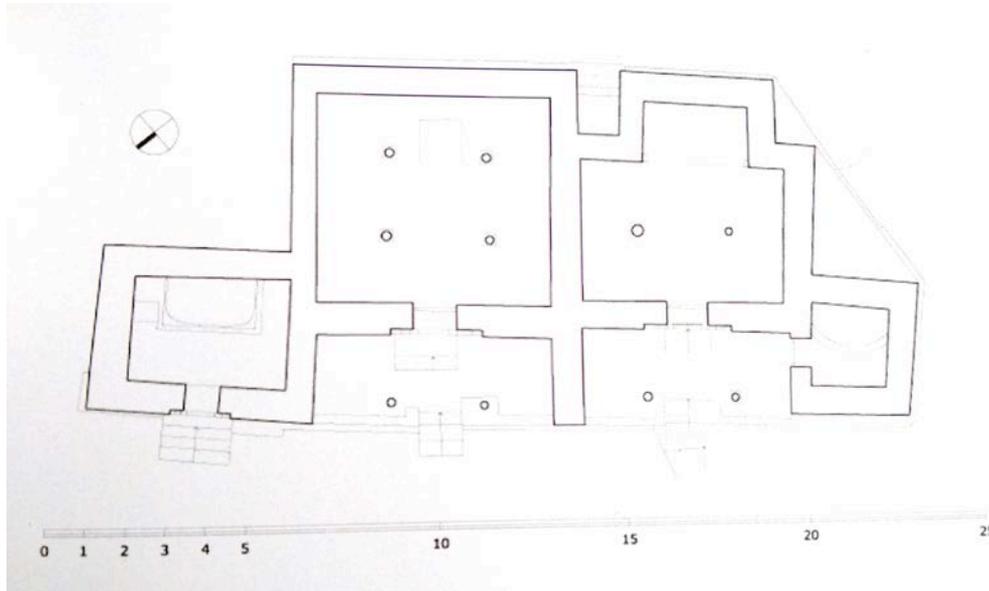


Figure 2: Ground Plan, Mongyu Monastery

Source: <https://www.archresearch.tugraz.at/results/Mangyu/mangyu3.html>

Its antiquity indicates that it must have been constructed during the revival of Buddhism in Western Tibet. It contains large amount of rare wall paintings from 11th-12th century that are among the most precious and prepossessing in existence today. Its statues and paintings embrace many unique works of art representing the ancient art from the formerly vital marvelled Buddhist centre of Kashmir. Stylistically they may be compared to the famous paintings of the early temples of Alchi to which the foundation of Mongyu is contemporaneous. The wall paintings are articulate documents that contribute in resolving the chronology of the paintings of Alchi too. In 1909, Francke observed two sets of inscriptions at Mongyu, both in Vairochana Temple. He attributed this inscription to the 11th or 12th century due to the presence of archaic spelling (Francke 1914, 57).

It is evident that the paintings of Mongyu are not an isolated phenomenon and are further progression of north-western Indian style more particularly medieval Kashmiri style in the tradition of painting at Alchi. Mostly, the Paintings of Mongyu are painted by the artists of the same tradition to which the early temples of Alchi are ascribed.

It is difficult to guess the real antiquity of the temples, but the irregular plan form certainly confirms the later addition of the two-side temples dedicated to Vairocana and a smaller one with a niche. The walls are adorned with multiple images which are extremely badly damaged but which certainly date back to a period before the 14th century. The antiquity of the Mongyu temples is to be found in the wood work and the two door-ways leading to the Vairochana and Avalokiteshwara temple which have their door lintels carved with lotus flowers surrounded by the squared border of a mandala which also forms the basis of the plan of the Sum-tsek at Alchi.

The wall paintings of Mongyu are eloquent documents that may help us to resolve the problematic chronology of the paintings of Alchi Monastery. Like the Assembly Hall and the three-tiered temple of Alchi, the Assembly Hall and the Avalokiteshwara temple of Mongyu are of primary importance since these two temples preserve some early wall paintings. The finest wall paintings at Mongyu are found in the Assembly Hall. These paintings, in turn, stylistically seem very much akin to the paintings of the two early temples of Alchi. In their stylistic and thematic aspects, the paintings of Mongyu appear to have been derived from the same source

which inspired the paintings of the earliest temples of Alchi. The subject-matter of the painting is religious to fulfil the ritual purpose. Generally, these paintings comprise five-fold manifestation of Vairochana and various cycles (Mandalas) of Vairochana. Temples of Mongyu once had been as grand as Alchi in the past. But the paintings of Mongyu cannot stand with the Alchi paintings in its grandeur of variegated subject and theme, though the style remained unchanged.

The celestial nymphs of the Assembly Hall at Mongyu transport a gracious feminine elegance which counters the Alchi one. The painted figures display a beautiful blending of exquisite colour modelling and fully sinuous lines to produce plastic effect. The palettes of the artists appear to have been comprising of sophisticated and rich colours with variety of shades. (Figure 3)



Figure 3. Celestial Nymph, Mongyu Monastery
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

Delightful females of Mongyu paintings manifest a characteristic feature of the style which is found in the sensuous modelling of the pectoral muscles and gentle bulge of the belly. A delicate elongation of torso along with slim and supple body and full bust, oval face, prominent nose, double chin with bow shaped smiling lips and projection of narrow farther eye from three-fourth profile of the face, bring the figures in line with the ideal Indian feminine beauty that was conceptualised by the medieval Kashmiri artists of the 10th-11th Centuries who were summoned in the Western Tibetan Temples.

The divinities of Buddhist pantheon are depicted according to treatise of Buddhist iconography. The figures are shown wearing richly decorated costumes with a special penchant for minute details and naturalistic treatments. We notice that divinities are always provided with Indian costumes but wherever the artist has painted lay folk or local kings or priests, he brought a variety of costumes which display an affinity with the Central Asian costumes and Kashmiri costumes. These types of costumes we have seen in the three tiered temple and the Assembly Hall at Alchi. In fact, these costumes bear a stamp of Iranian influence but it would not be misnomer to call Parthian and Sassanian-Iranian costumes as Central Asian, because the whole Central Asian even North-Western peripheries of India were strongly influenced by Iranian culture of Sassanian period (Singh 1985, 90).

We have very few vestiges of painting of the early period at Mongyu, the rest have been damaged by the natural agencies or by the frequent visits of devotees. The best surviving examples of paintings are found in the Assembly Hall. These paintings are very interesting items being painted by Kashmiri painters presumably summoned by Lotsava Rinchen bZang Po.

In the same temple there can be noticed a number of friezes representing the paintings of female devotees. In these paintings the artist has incorporated the folk elements. However, these elements were yet alive in spite of the overwhelming influence of Kashmiri artistic tradition. The figures of the female devotees in the painting show a type of costume which is popular in nomadic world of Central Asia and equally in Tibet and Western Tibet since the time immemorial. The figures are shown wearing long tunic, tight trousers and white capes similar to the costumes worn by the queen in the 'Libation scene' of the Assembly Hall, Alchi (Pic 4 & 5). Nomadic or barbarian features such as the thin plaits of hairs are distinctly shown in the painting. The same feature can also be observed in the colossus of Maitreya at Mulbek in Ladakh dating back to the 7th Century onwards.

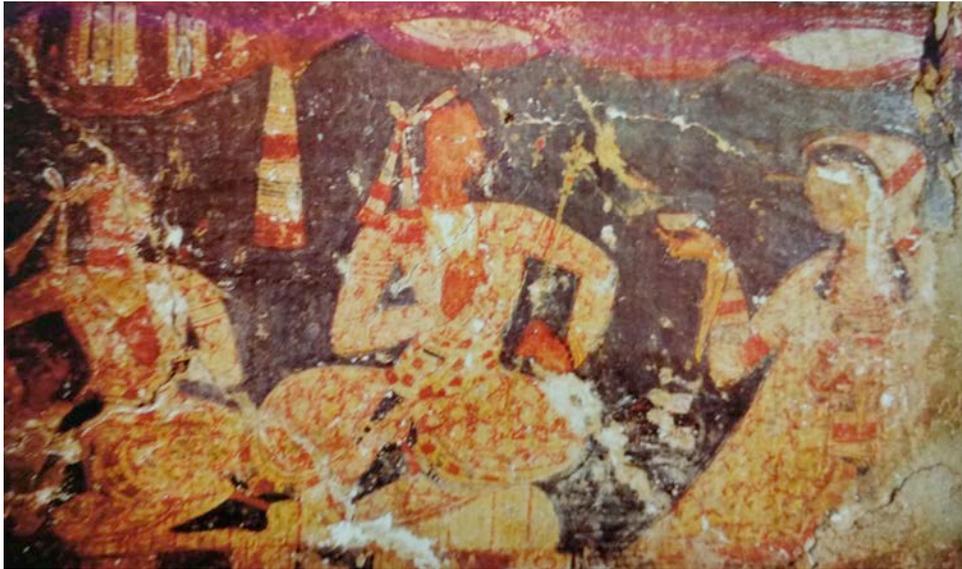


Figure 4. Libation Scene, Assembly Hall, Mongyu, Ladakh
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)



Figure 5. Libation Scene, Alchi, Ladakh
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

Similar types of hanging festoons for decoration are seen above the figures as observed in several panels at Alchi. On the extreme right side, a painted figure of Buddha appears enclosed by an aureole. His figure seems analogous to those found in the painting below the panel of Sarvavida in the Sum-tSek, Alchi.

Another painting of great interest found in the Congregation Hall provides us an indisputable evidence of uninterrupted relationship between the styles of the painting at two sites, Alchi and Mongyu. In this Temple, the spaces below the mandalas are been occupied by various narrative paintings. On the right side of the entrance wall, is the Conception of Siddhartha's Mother Queen Maya Devi and the dream she had that night, continuing with the Queen recounting this dream to her husband, King Suddhodhana Gautama (Figure 5). Next is the depiction of the king and the queen together on a palanquin surrounded by a number of visitors. More commonly such a scene is depicting the birth celebration where the child is shown to the public by his parents. Possibly, the birth celebration follows towards the right but unfortunately, the scene is almost entirely defaced. Red-skinned Queen Mahamaya, in royal attire in the night of her conception when she dreamt a white elephant would penetrate her from side. The Elephant is visible coming down on her from the sky, the moon slightly above her bed symbolises the night. A maid with flywhisk attends the queen towards the right of her bed.



Figure 5. Dream of Mahamaya, Assembly Hall, Mongyu
Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

A similar kind of narration can be well seen on the Dhوتي of Maitreya from the Sum-tSek Temple at Alchi (Figure 6). The picture shows Queen Maya standing in a graceful attitude under a fig-tree in the Lumbini Grove and holding onto a branch with her right hand. Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha-to be, is seen emerging from his mother's right side, but without hurting her, and being received by Apsaras, celestial virgins. In the lower picture, Prince Siddhartha, just born, is depicted, but shown already as an adult, having warm and cold water poured over him from two small bottles by the two snake kings, Nanda and Upananda. The style and almost heraldic composition of the scenes recall miniature painting or complex textile designs.

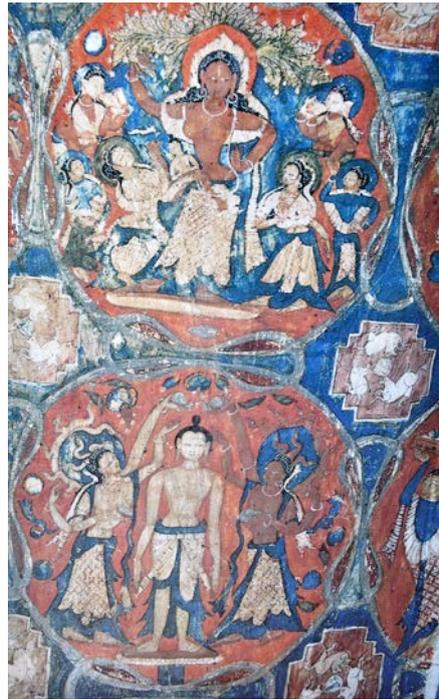


Figure 6. Birth of Buddha, Alchi Monastery
 Source: Chaturvedi, Khushboo (Photographer)

A close examination of the paintings from the Assembly Hall provides indisputable proof of the Kashmiri influence in Ladakh in the 10th-11th Centuries and a similar conclusion is drawn from the study of the Alchi paintings. On the stylistic ground, the paintings of the Assembly Hall of Mongyu seem slightly later to Mang-nang and Alchi.

Conclusion

The Mongyu sculptures, paintings, entrance stupas, and architectural layout can be analysed for such aspects as the modeling of figures, the shapes of eyes, the details of architectural representation, and a host of other qualities, major and minor, and then compared to the closest sites. On the basis of these characteristics, the art of Mongyu fits comfortably into the assemblage of an inclusive set of early Ladakhi monuments namely “the Alchi group of monuments” (Luczanits 2004, 125-126). This would include the Dukhang, the Sumtsek, the Manajusri Lhakahng and three of the painted entrance stupas of the Alchi Chokhor, but not the later Lhakahng Soma, or the Tsatsapuri shrine also in Alchi. To the Alchi group also belong the Lhakhang and the entrance stupa of Sumda Chung, and the lesser-known sites of Saspotse (Saspol) and the old shrine at Sku near the Markha Valley (Ham, 2011, 17).

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