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John Huntington. *The Phur-Pa, Tibetan Ritual Daggers*. Ascona, Switzerland, Artibus Asiae, 1975. 90 pp., 103 illus., $30.00

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JOHN HUNTINGTON. *The Phur-Pa, Tibetan Ritual Daggers.* Ascona, Switzerland, Artibus Asiae, 1975. 90 pp., 103 illus., $30.00.

In choosing the *phur-pa* for this extensive study, Professor Huntington has taken on, directly and indirectly, the multitude of problems surrounding any investigation of Tibetan artifacts, iconography, and history. All Tibetologists must contend with artifacts removed from their cultural setting, contradictions of textural dogma with observed usage and practice (as recorded by the few visitors to pre-1959 Tibet, or, today, among Tibetan refugees), and an extremely tenuous chronology for the dating of architecture, sculpture, painting, and ritual paraphernalia such as the *phur-pa*. With such a discouraging lack of knowledge of even major monuments of Tibetan art, an attempt to deal with the iconography, chronology, and meaning of these ritual "daggers" or "pegs" takes some courage. Professor Huntington has candidly admitted to many of these problems and hopes his preliminary study will lead to some initial clarifications.

Some fifty examples of *phur-pa* implements are illustrated and discussed, all in museum or private collections. Only two example (Nos. 10 and 26) are listed as being in the possession of Tibetan monks and thus presumably still in ritual use, although Professor Huntington does not speculate on such usage. Thus, we are studying artifacts divorced from their religious context and, as with much of Tibetan art (for even images and paintings must be viewed in some way as ritual paraphernalia), this is a serious loss. This reviewer has been shown daggers which seem to offer no intrinsic clues as to their value or meaning. They are crude, poorly fashioned pieces of worn iron and bronze, yet the Tibetan owners of such *phur-pa* will attribute profound value and meaning based extrinsically on their origin ("from the sky"), previous owners (both human and divine), and the ceremonial uses to which they may have been put. The iron blade of one such *phur-pa* had been twisted completely in a knot by the "magical" powers of a former owner. Whether the current owner believes his own stories or not, such "histories" open a completely separate method of evaluating *phur-pa* outside their aesthetic or formal content. Given the limitation of studying *phur-pa* in museums and private collections, Professor Huntington can deal only with their physical properties, although he also provides many important textural references to the generalized use of the ritual dagger in rNying-ma-pa and dGe-lugs-pa ceremonies.

In his introduction, Professor Huntington discusses the origin of the *phur-pa*, its connection to the historical figure Padmasambhava and the rNying-ma-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism, and the possible implications of its use by the Tibetan Bön religion. That the *phur-pa* as an implement possesses the spirit of Phur-pa the deity, who in turn relates to ferocious manifestations of Padmasambhava (at least in rNying-ma-pa tradition) is a significant basic thesis. The thorny problem of Bön and the possible indications that its twentieth-century form may have for the pre-Buddhist (pre-seventh century) religious practices of Tibet seem to be more than Huntington can legitimately tackle in this publication. Most troublesome of all is any discussion of the origin of the specific triangular-blade *phur-pa* as a weapon of mystical destruction. Finding a lack of evidence for such a "weapon" in Indian iconography, Professor Huntington suggests that it is indigenous to the Tibetan plateau. So many alternate possibilities exist, however, because of our present ignorance of early Tibetan history, that the theory of indigenousness is impossible to prove. *Phur-pa*-like implements (the trident, club, sword, and *vajra*) appear frequently in the hands of early Indian Brahmanical and Buddhist deities. Since the developed occurrence of the *phur-pa* in Tibet is often intimately associated with these weapons of earlier established deities, one can speculate on an evolutionary process which would link the idea and form of Tibetan ritual daggers to Indian prototypes.

Another consideration is the blending of this Indian tradition of arming the gods with the Central Asian custom of using actual weapons, of which the dagger is a very common type, to kill animals and men. Tribal peoples ranging from Western China to Iran in the pre-Christian era certainly had dagger-using traditions.

The definition of the *phur-pa* as a "peg" (such as a tent peg) can also be linked to Central Asian nomadic customs. Pegs, pins, and poles are represented in nomadic art thrust through dead animals, symbolically controlling the natural forces so crucial to tribal life. Problems arise as to where and when the northern dagger and peg usage blended with the southern mystical weapon tradition. Evidence predating the seventh century is lacking for Tibet, but such areas of cultural cross-currents as Kashmir have yielded material as early as the fifth and sixth centuries. Kashmiri sculpture of this period reveals complex interactions between Indian and Central Asian iconography and aesthetics.

There is a wide gap between speculation on early *phur-pa* occurrence and the weapon's manifestation in the last three centuries as a Tibetan implement of multiple meaning and usage. Professor Huntington has helpfully classified a wide range of formal types of *phur-pa*, from simplified abstractions to the actual representation of the deity Phur-pa as a *phur-pa*. In his categories and sub-categories, Huntington illustrates and describes the occurrence of various symbols and deities on the blade and handle and their relationship to the main themes of triangular blade and Phur-pa deity (present either in form, or spirit). These include the lotus, *vajra*, and endless knot, all common Buddhist motifs; a *dgra-lha* deity riding a *garuda*, both of whom Huntington associates with Padmasambhava; and *rTa-mgrin/Hayagriva*, the protective deity associated with the horse head. The latter deity is very commonly found on *phur-pa*, in fact Huntington discusses eighteen examples associated with Hayagriva. He offers a convincing argument that the horse-head god is in fact a form of Padmasambhava who in turn is manifesting in all *phur-pa* as the deity Phur-pa. This is also true for three examples associated with the deity Blo-ldan mChog Sred, another manifestation of Padmasambhava.

There are several final categories of *phur-pa* discussed, among them the small *khatvanga phur-pa* relating directly to the common Hindu and Buddhist trident and associated by Huntington, again, with Padmasambhava; the Nepalese form of *phur-pa (kila);* one Chinese example; and two supposedly Bön examples. Five appendices give some interesting commentary on the *dgra-lha*, facial types of deities found on *phur-pa* handles, a rNying-ma-pa ritual concerning Padmasambhava, a Phur-pa mandala, and the rNying-ma-pa deity Che mchog yon tan gyi lha.

Professor Huntington's pioneering effort will certainly

provoke discussion and argument among Tibetologists, and, we hope, will lead to further information as to the origin, meaning, and use of this fascinating ritual weapon.

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MARK ROSKILL. *What is Art History?* London, Thames and Hudson, 1976. 192 pp., 127 illus., $7.35 (paper).

Were this book simply called *Some Classic Problems in the History of Italian Renaissance Painting, and Related Themes*, one could say all kinds of nice things about it — it is soundly researched, urbane in style, insightful. But when the title is *What is Art History?*, with a clear implication that "Art History" means problems in connoisseurship and attribution in the field of Italian Renaissance and other related painting (i.e., Baroque, and, inevitably, Picasso as terminus of the cave-through-Brancacci Chapel-to-Us line of progress in World Civilization), then we are all in trouble.

The author is aware of the problem — a little. "Art," he informs us on page 182, "is a luxury. It is not one of the basic needs of the human race. The kind of paintings discussed in this book have always appealed to, and been appreciated by, a wealthy and privileged minority." He further suggests, "If art is a luxury, art history must be a luxury of luxuries — the icing on the very top of the cake!"

Fortunately, there is a lot more to art history than one might guess from a book with this title. There is, to begin with, a huge branch of art history that deals with arts in India, Japan, China, America — about which not one word appears. There is also a mass of literature demonstrating that there and everywhere else in historic times, even in the Italian Renaissance, art was never "a luxury . . . not one of the basic needs of the human race." That kind of art has only appeared, in fact, roughly from the mid-nineteenth century on. What we call "art" today is not the same kind of activity that we refer to as "art" produced in historic times. Not that it necessarily looks different; not that it involves a different technology — it simply *does* different things in and for society. To think of historic arts in modern categories is like imagining that gardening and golfing are the same kind of activity, because both involve people bending over the ground, stick in hand. Recognizing the difference is why the popular arts are coming to be widely and seriously studied today — not, as this author seems to imply, in some spirit of *noblesse oblige* ("art historians have shown an increased interest in . . . looking at a work of art in a way that assumes an artist's desire to reach a non-exclusive audience"), but because popular/commercial art *do* in and for *our* society what historic arts did in and for *their* society. Can you imagine Pope Julius II behaving like modern monks at Vence, calling on Michelangelo as they did on Matisse, and saying in effect, "Please, Sir, give me a specimen of your genius; please feel free to express yourself any way you want; I don't care what you do, just so long as I have a Work of Art from Your Hand." Frederick Hartt demonstrated in 1950 that Michelangelo did not invent the Sistine Ceiling iconography himself, but that it was dictated to him by the Papal theologian Marco Vigerio, and that Michelangelo's greatness consisted in giving new, convincing forms to what the commission required. Orthodox art history has been unbelievably slow in drawing the inevitable conclusion, with its plain implications for a necessary change of accepted attitudes towards artistic activity today.

The fundamental criticism to be made of Roskill's book, in short, is its assumption that twentieth-century categories of, and attitudes towards, art can be translated *mutatis mutandis* back into earlier times. True, something like the modern idea and definition of art as "creative self-expression" was emerging in Italian Renaissance times. But to imagine that such an attitude was of as primary importance in the Renaissance as it is today, let alone ever the kind of exclusive concern it has become in modern times, is to misread history hopelessly. Furthermore, such a confusion makes art history a useless tool for serious objective study of the past — a disaster, when you consider that for long stretches of the past, arts and artifacts constitute almost all the evidence for the past that has survived. This is a problem that concerns all art historians.

An admirable collection of essays on art history of the Italian Renaissance and related periods, this book is. A definition of "What is Art History" in the 1970s, it is not. It might once have been a definition of What Art History Was, back in the days when "art" consisted of Precious Objects displayed for edification of wealthy connoisseurs, produced for *rentier* dilettantes.

But those days are fading — indeed, it takes no great prophetic gift to predict that such an audience, and the concept of art accompanying it, is headed for as certain extinction as anything in this uncertain world of time and history can be.

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