

Bhutanese Contemporary Art

Kinley Wangmo

A ferocious mask with fangs, punishing eyes, and a crown of skulls fills the canvas. A set of eyes, almost lost behind the mask, peer through the gaping mouth.

This painting of a traditional mask, depicting a Buddhist deity, is a modern take on what is traditional. These masks invoke a feeling of worship. But for artist Zimbiri, 25, it carries a sentimental value, for it ties her to the path of self-discovery as an artist and a Bhutanese.

Zimbiri's path to self-discovery can be related to the fledging contemporary art scene emerging in the country. Traditional Bhutanese art, one that arises from a culture that is deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition, is omnipresent. It is so ingrained in the daily lives of Bhutanese that it can be overlooked, sometimes taken for granted, and might have even failed to inspire artists looking for expression and meaning. Artists have often said that they deliberately kept what is traditional or Bhutanese out of their work.

But of late, tradition seems to inspire and this can be seen in various forms and medium of the arts, be it music, fashion, film or art per se. Contemporary artists are increasingly seeking inspiration from what is traditional and, in the process, are creating a movement in the evolution of art in the country.

Contemporary Bhutanese art, however, is only about two decades old and has yet to gain foothold. Artist Karma Wangchuk Sonam, a member of Voluntary Artists' Studio, Thimphu (VAST), says the development of contemporary art is attributed to be in sync with the development of VAST and its artists. VAST was founded by a group of artists in 1998 to spread and promote modern art among youth and art enthusiasts.

The identity of Bhutanese contemporary art is yet to be established and experimentation is limited for various reasons. According to Karma Wangchuk Sonam, "The real impact and imprint that the environment has on the psyche of the artist is rarely experimented with".

He continues to observe, “It may be true that we are trying to find an identity, and I hope we find it eventually, and I hope we take off in multiple directions. The first predictable identity, I feel, will come from the dilemma that the artist empathises with the common man’s existence and relationships with the age old belief systems that Bhutan is firmly based upon”.

The limitation is mainly felt because contemporary works of art, according to Karma Wangchuk Sonam, are products of “souvenir artists”. “The market for contemporary artists is visiting tourists”, he said, adding that the works try to reflect the supposed impression of tourists and by doing so the artists inadvertently create elements of religion and culture.

Another element affecting the development of contemporary art was that artists have never had the strong urge to make their voices heard because there was no need for it. “Maybe when the true character of Bhutanese, the political rulers and their parties in a democracy is revealed, then the voice of the ordinary man on the street may need to be heard, and art will rear its beautiful head”, he said. “Why fix something that is not broken?”

Additionally, there was also a lack of appreciation for contemporary art or respect for “interpretations and evolution of ideas”. Kelly Dorji of Terton Gallery, which was opened six years back, believes that taste in art of both the local market and the tourists are mainly decorative. “There is rarely an investment value attached to art”, he said.

This has had a bearing on the emerging artistic identity, with artists pursuing mostly Buddhist themes and landscape. “Contemporary art is fragile, and in art many movements are born out of rebel and sometimes advancement ideology”, he said. “What may be prudent, in our case, is to enjoy and promote the marriage of traditional art styles with more contemporary designs”.

Olaf Van Cleef, a French artist, and counsellor to the high-end jewellery company, Cartier, who was recently in the country working with Royal Textile Academy and VAST artists in Trashiyangtse, observed that artists he worked with were cautious of rules and experiments. This was attributed to the school system where tradition was understood as being stagnant and not undergoing change.

Few people in Trashiyangtse, he said, knew of a modern art studio. “No one was here to paint a pink elephant”, he said, referring to the artists he worked with, adding that

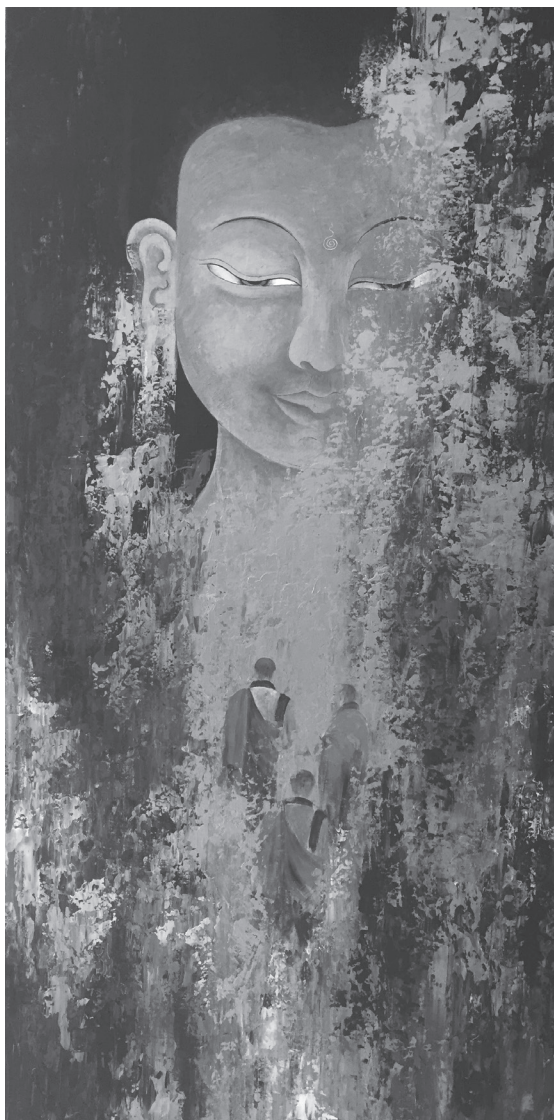
there was, however, a capacity and a connection with Bhutanese culture. “Look at the Buddha with blue hair”.

A museum for modern art in Bhutan is a necessity. Traditional art, according to Van Cleef, was focused on religious subjects and craftsmanship. “Bhutan is a country of happiness and what is happiness if there is no modernity in art?” he said, adding that duplication of art would stifle creativity. “Art is an image, a reflection of a society, and imagination in art reflects liberty”.

Reflecting on works of contemporary artists such as Asha Kama, Van Cleef praised them as not only exceptional but also creations that protected and promoted the aesthetics and identity of the country. Of Asha Kama, he remarks, “He is like the Indian Paritosh Sen or Picasso”.

The works of Zimbiri are also modern but connected to the Bhutanese identity. Zimbiri’s paintings of traditional masks look at the ceremonial instruments as a form of disguise or façade. Through the portraits of the traditional masks the artist explores the positive and the negative of masks, the contradiction between the need to be open and the need to don a mask, and the role of a mask as an armour against “pointy words and explosive feelings”.

Zimbiri struggled to find a voice as an artist, especially while pursuing her degree in economics and visual arts from Wheaton College in the United States. “I wanted to prove that it wouldn’t be my unique culture that would make me an artist, but that I



The Buddha. Art by Asha Karma
Photo Credit: Siok Sian Pek-Dorji

had something to say as a person”. she said, adding that she avoided using images and icons that were Bhutanese. “But by doing so, I found I was silencing a vital part of who I was and that I was inevitably influenced by my history, culture and environment”.

Studying art history in college gave Zimbiri a window to see how there has always been individual artistic expression within the confines of traditional art.

“Contemporary art in our country is pushing boundaries, with artists experimenting with the technical side of art, the treatment of paint and canvas, techniques, and by contemplating on what art is”, she said. “The ideals and process behind an artwork is increasingly given more value as opposed to just the aesthetics”.

“As Brand Bhutan becomes internationally known, this time is crucial for the future of contemporary art”, said Zimbiri who believes in the soft power of art and its potential to bring positive change.

In the capital, where five art galleries have opened since VAST was founded in 1998, traditional artists are increasingly embracing modern art. Traditional art has no dearth of markets, for all facets of Bhutanese life employs their skills, be it a simple traditional table, a *mani dungkhor* or the gigantic walls of the *dzongs*. Yet, they openly embrace modern art for it broadens their perspective, challenges them with an empty canvas, and allows their voices to manifest themselves as work of arts.

A clear distinction can be seen in contemporary art works of those with formal training in traditional art and ones without training; this is especially in how figures are outlined clearly and in the lack of deliberate smear-like brush strokes.

Traditional master artists including Phurba Namgay and Gembo Wangchuk of Art United, and Asha Kama, all of whom have graduated from the National Institute for *Zorig Chusom* (Thirteen Arts and Crafts), have fluidly stepped in and out of these two worlds, and have substantially contributed to contemporary Bhutanese art.

It has been almost two decades since VAST was established and over a year since it became a Civil Society Organisation (CSO). Asha Kama said becoming a CSO had streamlined the activities of VAST. “I poured out my dreams and vision of art in our country during an organisational development exercise with executive committee members”, he recounts. “All of us are at par with our vision and mission and how we can contribute towards the growth of art in the country”.

Kelly Dorji, who is also a board member of VAST, said it took six years for the studio to get CSO status. “The board can function much more at ease now when it comes to international funds, and it will only get better”, he said. His hope is that VAST will help produce many young artists and set a scene for improvement in techniques.