ART IN MONGOLIA

By BEATA VON ERDBERG

There is hardly a visitor to China who is not attracted by what the curio dealers call "Mongolian art." Behind this term there is a long story. This is entertainingly told by our author, who has made a special study of the subject. Most of the art objects shown are from the collection of Mme. Clémann in Peking.—K.M.

THE Mongols, living on the northern borders of the Middle Kingdom, were always classed by the Chinese as "barbarians," a term applied by them to practically all non-Chinese people. The Mongols are nomads, and the cultural possibilities of tribes constantly on the move must needs be smaller than that of agricultural settlers, who can store belongings in permanent dwellings. Though the Mongols did achieve a certain degree of culture by availing themselves of Chinese objects and ideas, their clumsy and sparing use of the niceties of civilization has always seemed barbaric to the Sons of Han. This term also befits much of the philosophy and most of the outward manifestations of their religion. Lamaism came to them from Tibet, a country hardly more civilized.

Tibetan traits fought and mixed with Chinese ones in building up an art for the Mongols. Artistically the Chinese were, of course, superior, but the frightening directness of the Tibetan imagination was often preferable for putting over a religious idea to a simple people, who believed what they saw. Chinese styles had to sell themselves; Tibetan forms were accepted without questioning as coming from the holy land. But this prestige was not sufficient to compete with the wide range and fertility of Chinese art. In the face of such overwhelming offers, the taste of the Mongols struggled to pick out what would please them most and serve them best.

TO ROB IS EASIER THAN TO MAKE

From early times the nomad people of the steppes to the north and the west of China have looked upon her as the cradle of material riches, the source of articles of luxury and artistic refinement. They did have crafts of their own: the Scythians of the first few centuries A.D. were skilled in metal work and decorated their felts, using a style of animal decoration not derived from Chinese art. But the hardy herdsmen and warriors had little leisure to spend on the elaboration of such techniques. Nor did they have to, for they could avail themselves of the products of skillful and patient Chinese workers, either by swift raids into their territory or by exchange of goods. At times the desired wares would come to them by a still easier way as tribute from the Chinese to stave off further raids. Thus the Hunnish chieftains could cut their barbarian clothes from finely embroidered Chinese silks and drink from wine cups delicately painted in red and black lacquer by the artists of the imperial Han workshops. All these rich spoils, tokens of their might and splendor, followed them to their graves.

When Genghis Khan rose to power, he raised with him a people who had hitherto been of no significance, politically as well as culturally. He wanted his people to be warriors only. Captured swordsmiths of many nations forged their weapons, women and slaves tended their herds. Their finery was obtained the easy way, from slain enemies and plundered cities.

But the Mongols who followed their leaders to the west saw a greater variety of artistic forms than their precursors, who only knew their immediate neighbors. They destroyed the flowering Mohammedan culture in Persia and the Caliphate, but not so completely that it did not influence them. It inspired the shape of the Moscow Kremlin and of Sarai on the Volga, "the most beautiful city in the world." A goldsmith from Paris worked for the Great Khan in Karakorum, and the Mongols especially admired his mechanical wonders. It seems doubtful

whether many artists of pure Mongol blood were responsible for the splendor of their capitals and the tents of the mighty. The spoils from so many rich, now devastated, countries must have been enormous. It still remains a puzzle where all these treasures have gone. Karakorum must have been the richest city in the world.

After the downfall of the Yüan dynasty in 1368, the Mongols were reduced to their original territory and reverted to nomadic life. During their sovereignty over China they had lost—culturally overwhelmed by the Chinese—what chance they might have had to express an artistic individuality of their own. China was again their only source of inspiration. Influences from other countries had to submit to China's cultural monopoly.

ART FOLLOWS RELIGION

The primitive rites of shamanistic nature worship did not inspire artistic production. In the sixteenth century the Mongols were converted to the Yellow Church of Lamaism. They suddenly found themselves adherents of a cult that needed temples, statues, pictures, and many ritual objects, which only the artist could fashion. All these were strange to them, and in order to fill their temples they had to follow foreign styles and employ foreign craftsmen. Chinese artisans skillfully blended their native style with the cruder art of Tibet, the cradle of the Yellow Church. Their Mongol employers were probably little interested in one style or the other from an artistic point of view. But they demanded skill, which China could supply, and—more important—strict adherence to the rules of their religion. Their models came from Tibet; hence, for religious reasons, they demanded a recognizable similarity to the venerated Tibetan objects.

FREE MOVEMENT VS. SOLID MASS

As a nomad people the Mongols had no architecture of their own. They felt oppressed in cities and stone houses. The light felt tent, easily moved, quickly erected in any location, guaranteed them their freedom and independence. Yet they were impressed by stately and massive structures which could defy enemies and time. Chinese architecture captivated them by its splendor and majestic expansion; Tibetan buildings impressed them with their solidity and height. The best-known exponent of the Tibetan style is probably the Potala of Lhasa with its many stories and rows of small, often walled-up windows. Tibetan buildings are made up of cubic blocks; they seem like fortresses compared with Chinese halls with their open fronts and curved roofs.

After the experiences of their wars, the Mongols, who always lived and moved at ground level, appreciated an immovable stronghold, raised above the ground, not as a graceful pavilion, but as a compact, enduring mass. The higher lamas and dignitaries of the Yellow Church, though they shared their people's aversion to living in solid houses, nevertheless preferred temple-like, enduring buildings of imposing size for their domains, because they were thus lifted above ordinary mortals and made to seem more like the gods.

Today, architecture in Mongolia shows the rather superficial blending of the Chinese and the Tibetan. Originally, the Mongols had "Tibetan" temples and "Chinese" temples, and there was a marked difference between them. The Tibetan form was probably introduced first; but by the end of the last century it was already almost extinct in its pure form.

These buildings were more vertical in proportion and very different from the horizontal halls of the Chinese, with their graceful red columns, curved roofs and decorated eaves and ridges. The "imperial" temples, subsidized from Peking, were, of course, purely Chinese. They were also more colorful and graceful than the Tibetan structures, which soon had to yield to Chinese influences. Today, those temples which still adhere to the Tibetan proportions and construction have at least a Chinese roof over the second "story" to boast of (FIG. 1). The interior consists of one high hall; pillars and columns are decorated in the Chinese manner with gold and colors (FIG. 4).

Most Mongol temples are built of wood, more rarely—the imperial temples among them—of brick. Both materials are rare and precious in Mongolia. The use of wood for wall and roof must needs change the aspect of Chinese architecture. The effect is less solid, sometimes it looks almost flimsy, and many of the roof decorations, originally executed in glazed tile, must be omitted.

Though the Mongols favor the vertical proportion in their buildings, they have never adopted the rising spire of the Chinese pagoda. The Tibetan form of the stupa reliquiary, the "bottle pagoda," is found

ARCHITECTURE IN MONGOLIA

Fig. 1 The Djoichen Lama Temple of Dsun Kura, Urga. Gilt knobs and ritual ornaments on dark woodwork over white walls

Fig. 2 Courtyard of the Djoichen Lama Kura, Urga. A polygonal brick building with pointed roof like a Kirghiz tent and a Siberian porch, among purely Chinese buildings

Fig. 3 Lama performing ritual prostrations before a small temple in the steppes of Outer Mongolia. It is built of wood and retains the shape of the movable tent

Fig. 4 Interior of a monastery temple in the steppes of Outer Mongolia. Low tables, cushions, books, and musical instruments await the lamas for the prayer service. The throne of the highest lama stands against the back wall

MONGOLIAN PAINTING

FIG. 5 The Wheel of Life, from rebirth to rebirth, revolving around the sources of evil, held by a servant of death. Painted on coarse cloth in warm colors and gold

FIG. 6 A form of the Bodhisattva Manjushri, god of wisdom, on a white lion. Appliqué of colored silk, made by Chinese in the Mongol taste

FIG. 7 Lama painter of Outer Mongolia with an unfinished picture

everywhere. Topped by sun and moon, it symbolizes the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, ether. Its measurements follow strict rules, which guarantee harmonious proportions to this queer combination of heterogeneous shapes. We find it in temples, over tombs, or as monuments erected by a devotee or for some special reason.

Siberian blockhouse architecture and the pointed tops of Kirghiz tents may be recognized in a few smaller temple buildings, which often have gabled entrance porches. They look out of place and utilitarian among the Chinese and Tibetan forms (FIG. 2).

The Mongol nomads cannot be expected to add any features of their own to this architectural mixture. Yet the semiglobular shape of their tents with the flattened top is copied in some of the small local temples. They still preserve the shape of the movable temple yurts of old times. Now they have settled down and are built of wood, but their size and shape are those of an ordinary dwelling-tent, with the addition of a window or two (FIG. 3).

PAINTING TRAVELS LIGHT

Architectural forms can only travel in small reproductions, and much is changed or lost on the way. Paintings, on the other hand, are easily transported, especially in the scrolls of the East. A great number of them must have found their way to Mongolia through pilgrims and missionaries or as presents from India and Tibet. They fixed in the minds of the Mongol faithfuls the pictures of the gods in Indian form and attire. Iconographic rules, precepts of materials, shape and color—important in the secret teachings of the lamas—could be most faithfully obeyed in painting. Its illustrative value to a mostly illiterate congregation made painting indispensable.

Itinerant Chinese craftsmen traveled from temple to temple, mended the old gods and painted new ones. They can hardly be called artists; but they knew how to draw the outlines in gold and mix colors, which would make the picture a luminous spot in the dark temple—bright greens and garish pinks, fiery red and deep, black blue.

GODS WHOLESALE AND RETAIL

In Peking workshops, where quantities of religious pictures in all sizes are painted for Lamaism at home and abroad, the work is carried out with speed and precision, owing to an extensive division of labor. The master drafts the composition with ink. He is familiar with the Tibetan aspects of Buddhist deities; he has drawn the same faces, hands, draperies, and attributes over and over again. Stencils are also used. Apprentices specialize in attributes, jewelry, animals, landscape, or other background details. Others fill in the flat, bright colors, and the last touch is given by the specialist in gold painting (nowadays a cheap substitute) which emphasizes all the important contours.

Beauty was not judged by very sophisticated standards; if the picture was bright and new, if every detail was iconographically correct, the painter was sure to please his customer. For a richer effect, silk or embroidery were sometimes used instead of painting (FIG. 6).

THE MAGIC TOUCH

But these pictures by Chinese craftsmen were mere decorations, unfit for the magic purposes of esoteric Lamaism. Only those painted under strict observance of sacred rules by Mongol or Tibetan monks, who lived a holy life and conceived the correct form of the god through meditation, could be sacred pictures with miraculous powers (FIG. 7). Another monk sat by the artist and meditated, thereby banning the god to be portrayed, so that he would take shape in the picture. The rules which fixed outline and color for each superhuman being had already been laid down in India. The painter could use his imagination only on the background and the small attendant figures.

These painters also observed certain technical rules. Linen was the material commonly used, prepared with chalk and a glue made from fish bladder. This glue is also used in the colors. The surface is polished with the tooth of a wolf or boar. Cow gall gives brilliance to the colors.

Compositions which try to give concrete evidence of an abstract conception consist of a profusion of details, logically and schematically arranged to teach the faithful a lesson. The "Wheel of Life" (FIG. 5), uniting many scenes in a geometrical composition, gives the painter a chance to vent his imagination on palaces of bliss (almost all of these are in the Chinese style of architecture), the fires and tortures of hell (this theme is so tempting that it often takes up more than the alloted one sixth of the

wheel space), and lively and amusing genre scenes with tents, cattle, thieves, and sweethearts. Paintings of the "Wheel of Life" are quite common, since they are comprehensible to the layman and embrace most of the basic teachings of Lamaist Buddhism concerning the migration of souls.

Within this limited scope of freedom there are good and bad paintings, crude and delicate, colorful and garish, with individual or conventional details. Their religious purpose overshadows the artistic one to a much greater extent than in any other religious art of the East or West. For any other kind of painting there was no reason or inspiration—not even a place to put it.

A GOOD MARKET FOR SCULPTURE

What has been said about religious painting also applies to Lamaist sculpture. The iconographic, esoteric rules appear perhaps to be more strict for the latter, as this technique has less room for background details. But it was not necessary for the artist to live a saintly life or observe certain religious practices while shaping a god or demon. Life and divine powers entered the statue with the "intestines," i.e., relics, jewels, and holy scriptures, which were ceremoniously sealed into its hollow body. Most of the Lamaist figures on the curio market today have been robbed of their precious contents.

The materials for Mongol sculpture are unbaked clay, bronze, and wood. Figures of the latter material were mostly made in China, since wood is rare in Mongolia. The bronze figures, too, are for the greater part made in China. Workshops in Peking specialize in Lamaist bronzes, mostly in small sizes, which they sell to visiting Mongols. At the beginning of this century, Russian foundries also realized that good profits were to be made in this line. The whole set of bronze statuary covering the walls of the new Maidari Temple in Urga, built in 1911, was, so the Russians said, cast in St. Petersburg. Since all Lamaist figures are mechanical reproductions of a conventional model, Chinese or Russian origin would in no way make any difference in the style. Clay figures were erected *in situ*—especially in the imperial temples—by itinerant Chinese modelers in the same crude way as in North China.

A FLAIR FOR THE DRAMATIC

Bronze is the costliest material, but it is best suited for Lamaist statuary. The exaggerations of posture and movement, which especially characterize the terrible aspects of the gods, demand a firm material which will support extended and contorted limbs, flames, and many attributes, without the danger of dropping or breaking off. Beauty could not very well be expected to grace these horrifying deformations of the human form. Since that was not the intention either, only elaborate decorative details, coloring, gilding, or a setting of precious stones could atone to a certain degree for their revolting appearance. It was almost impossible for the artist to show any originality, the same rules which restricted the painter also cramping the sculptor's style.

The sculptor with a flair for the dramatic was the most successful. If he could make his terrible figures convincingly terrifying, if they could make the beholder shudder, they were well done (FIG. 8). The benign aspects offered a greater chance to their "portraitist," but again the Tibetan style with the conventional sharp features, long eyes, and rigid or much-curved posture leaves little scope for the imagination. Moreover, many of the Lamaist figures have a multitude of heads and arms; that is another obstacle in the artist's path, which only the greatest are able to overcome. It is one thing to represent a beautiful human shape in a lovely statue, but it requires real skill to convince the beholder that a deity with eleven heads and a thousand arms

The Eight Offerings

FIG. 8 The terrible goddess Lhama, with crown and necklace of skulls, crossing a sea of blood on her mule, with an elephant-headed and a lion-headed attendant, both clad in human skins. The mule is covered with the skin of her own son whom, as a queen of Ceylon, she vowed to kill if she could not convert her people to Buddhism. Wood, carved and painted

FIG. 9 The goddess Ushnisha, with three heads and eight arms, and two adoring *apsaras* (angels) on lotus stalks. Note the grace of the hands forming Mudras, mystic gestures of benediction. Gilt bronze

MONGOLIAN SCULPTURE

FIG. 10 Bronze incense burner. The smoke escapes through the open mouth of Sheren-ökin-tengri, an earth goddess of fertility, dressed in a tiger skin and holding thunderbolt and bell, fertility symbols

FIG. 11 Portrait of Jonsun Lama, the teacher of the last Khutukhtu of Urga. Sculpture in wood on an altar in Dsun Kura, Urga, executed by a Mongol artist, early 20th century

FIG. 12 A beauty from Urga, with silver headdress set with coral and turquoise. Russians and Chinese can be seen peering through the arcs of the elaborate coiffure eked out with horsehair and stiffened with glue

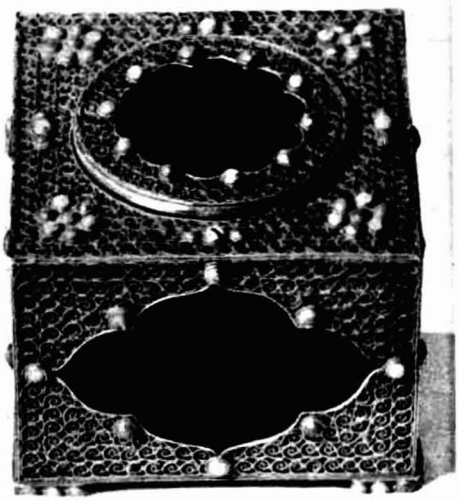

FIG. 14 Small box with lid. Dark wood set in silver filigree with semiprecious stones

FIG. 13 Top: Bumba, a pitcher for holy water, which is sprayed with the peacock feathers

Bowl for fat; wood, silver, and stones

Bottom: Pilgrim bottle; wood and silver

Silver box for a talisman god

Small wooden bowl with silver cover, for incense

may still possess a harmonious form (FIG. 9). And great artists rarely found their way to Mongolia.

GODMOTHERS WITHOUT GIFTS

It is unfortunate that the Lamaist style of sculpture originated and flourished at a time when neither India nor China—the two cultures who were godmother to this new child—had a plastic art of any importance. What was left of the sensual grace of Indian sculpture is still found in Nepalese bronzes; but from there to Mongolia is a long way, and the once delicate models were taken over by clumsy hands. China, too, had not had a plastic revival since the art of the T'ang sculptors waned.

Where, then, could the Lamaist image-makers turn? It would take a strong and living inspiration to give the spark to this new style, cramped at the outset by an iconography that defied the tender yearnings for beauty. Neither India nor China could give this spark, and it is small wonder that the bulk of Lamaist sculpture is the sad product of uninspired artisans. Only now and then does one find in Mongolia a work, dating perhaps from the Ch'ien-lung period, which betrays a more skillful and loving hand (FIG. 10). Some of the slick modern products are not too revolting, and at times even beautiful in a smooth, if empty way. Occasionally we come across a bit of portraiture done by Mongol artists which is most strikingly lifelike (FIG. 11).

The sanctity of the earth, which forbade disturbing the ground by digging, may account for the absence of stone figures; for there is workable stone in Mongolia. The Turkic people who lived on the great plains in the time of the T'ang dynasty have left us traces of stone statuary, crude and solid figures standing on guard at the tombs of important people. Time, weather, and wanton destruction have been hard on them, so that it is difficult to say whether similar figures on the site of the old Mongol city Shang-tu in Inner Mongolia were different from them or not. Even in their prime, in the thirteenth century, they must have been quite primitive. To the Mongols of today they are as alien as they seem to us.

IRON IS NOBLER THAN GOLD

Outer Mongolia produced no metal for the same superstitious reason that barred their use of stone. By now the Russians will have changed that; but then, the resulting metals will not be used for religious figures.

Bronze and silver were imported. Though the Mongol currency, such as it was, was on the silver standard, and they knew the value of gold, iron has always seemed to them the noblest of metals. Doubtless this preference is a remnant of warrior days, when the metal that made the blade and deadly point was the most important and the most valuable. Native craft still uses iron; e.g., for bridles and stirrups, and the knife everybody carries for use at meals. It is often beautifully decorated with inlay of gold and silver. For the more extensive needs of the image-maker, bronze was the finest metal, unless silver was chosen for statues of small size.

PUNISHMENT OF THE GODS

Not many Mongols know the art of metal work, and these work in iron or in silver. Tibetan and Mongol lamas jealously guard the secret of an alloy of pewter, copper, and a bit of silver and gold, used for ritual vessels, which are said to have an especially melodious and lasting tone when struck. On the whole, the work of native artisans does not compare favorably with that of their Chinese colleagues.

Among both parties there was many a scoundrel who feathered his own nest at the expense of the pious donor or jewelry-minded beauty. A Mongol silversmith once showed his friends a statuette of Avalokitesvara, fashioned from solid silver. He intended to offer it to a temple, so that he might be cured of his heart trouble. "When I was young," he explained, "I wandered around the country plying my trade. The women came to me with their silver and asked me to turn it into ornaments for their hair and dress. I always mixed a bit of lead into the silver and made quite a nice, steady profit that way. Now the god has punished me with this illness, and I shall give the silver to him, that he may take his curse from me."

VALUABLE WOMEN

Aside from herds and horses, the family fortune consists of silver, and this the woman carries on her body in the form of an elaborate headdress with plaques, chains and pendants (FIG. 12); she also has belt buckles,

bracelets, and rings. These are mostly made by Chinese silversmiths, who have a set of patterns which please the Mongols, and supply the turquoises and corals, of which they are especially fond. Chinese dealers in semiprecious stones made quite a fortune; they exchanged their wares for costly furs. The profits were considerable, because only stones of inferior quality found their way to the Mongols, who gladly paid a good price for these colorful additions to their silver fortune. They share their preference for coral and turquoise with the Tibetans. The soft red and the sky blue of these stones is perfect in combination with silver. Malachite and lapis lazuli are other stones used, also rubies of inferior quality and tourmaline shading from pink to yellow. The latter appear mostly as beads or pendants. A good deal of the "Mongolian articles" are the products of Peking workshops; they came to Mongolia ready-made—another proof of the adaptability of the Chinese artisan.

WOOD AND SILVER

Aside from ornaments for the adornment of the body, there were other articles which could be graced by the silversmith's art. For the cult there were pitchers for holy water, boxes, and bowls for offerings (FIG. 13). For the not-too-poor Mongol a wooden teabowl, set in silver—bottom, rim, and inside were usually covered with the metal —finely chased and engraved and often set with semiprecious stones, was indispensable. He always carried it with him. There were knives for eating, covered bowls for fat, and boxes for valuable personal belongings. Snuff bottles were in general use; they are almost twice the size of the Chinese variety.

Most of these articles add the darker and softer note of the wood to the shining color combination of silver and stones. Good wood is rare in Mongolia; preference is given to pieces from the root for their hardness and interesting grain. The value of a beautiful piece of wood from the heart or the root of a tree, with a star or flowerlike pattern in the grain, ranked with the silver in which it was set. A kind of poplar wood is mostly used, which originally came from Tibet but is now also imported from North China.

OFFERINGS AND DRAGONS

Though the Mongols did not invent the patterns which beautify their objects of daily use, ritual or practical, they have shown preference for certain ornaments in the vast store of Chinese decoration at their disposal. Since their religion covers every aspect of daily life, it is only natural that the symbols of their cult should occur again and again, not only on ritual objects, but also on practical things, as on boxes and teabowls. Among such symbols the "Eight Offerings" are the most popular; they lend themselves easily to many shapes and spaces, and we find them most frequently arranged in a circle on a round object.

The dragon, though not originally Buddhist, is almost as popular in Mongolia as in China. Big dragons decorate temples; small ones adorn lids or serve as handles. As the emblem of the Chinese emperor it came to Mongolia on political rather than religious grounds; but just as in China, it blends easily with almost any kind of decoration.

Chinese decoration of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties takes its motifs either from earlier styles or direct from nature. Birds, insects, and especially flowers and other plant forms, occur in ever new shapes. The Mongols do not have much taste for flowers and butterflies in irregular, naturalistic patterns. The beauty of natural forms does not mean much to them, unless it is the holy padma (lotus). Their taste, though modeled for centuries on Chinese lines, is still that of a primitive people, who prefer the geometric or stylized to the naturalistic and asymetric. Of the simpler forms of line decoration, spirals and cusps are most often found. These go well with the stones set into the silver, which are in most cases round (FIG. 14).

* * *

A Mongol's hands are clumsy from hard riding and hard weather. Everything he owns must be sturdy and pack easily. Everything made for or by him is compact and durable; the style follows the same trend. We are today often satiated with the overrefined products of skilled artists. We may then turn with relief to the robust and obvious gaiety of objects appreciated and used by the nomad herdsmen.