

## Mural paintings of Alchi

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Amidst fields of barley and on the edge of a precipice overlooking the Indus river, sits the monastic complex of Alchi (Figure). Built between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries the complex consists of three temples, a large *chorten* (*stupa*) and several smaller ones.

Alchi is by far the best known of Ladakh's monasteries, even though it is no longer an active monastery. It is renowned for its wall paintings, most significantly those in the Sumtsek (the three tiered temple). While the construction of Alchi is commonly attributed to the Great Tibetan scholar-translator, Rinchen Zangpo, there is some uncertainty as to whether he actually founded Alchi or not, though he can be given credit for at least inspiring its creation.<sup>1</sup>

Inscriptions found at Alchi ascribe the construction of the oldest temple, the Du'Khang (Congregation Hall), to a wealthy man known as Kalden Sherab who came from the village of Sumdo.<sup>2</sup>

The artistic style at Alchi combines Indian, Kashmiri, Tibetan and Central Asian artistic traditions. The overall structure of the buildings,

built from stone and mud-brick, with their flat roofs and heavy whitewashed walls corresponds to the Tibetan tradition. But the wooden elements of the open porch at the Sumtsek – the lions serving as brackets and the three figures of Maitreya, Aksobhya and a Bodhisattva placed inside a trilobed frame – are clearly derived from Kashmiri prototypes, that probably have their roots in Gandhara art. At the same time the murals document the flourishing trade history of Indian and Central Asian textiles as they demonstrate a variety of international techniques, motifs and styles with roots in India, Iran, Central Asia and the Near East. Men and women wrapped in woollen shawls, clearly a product of Kashmir, are evident along with men wearing cotton turbans and long robes adorned with chequered ornamentation or Sassanian roundels.

A rather simple, nondescript looking door forms the entrance to the Sumtsek. The low doorway forces all who enter to stoop, the action perhaps reminiscent of bowing to the gods inside. As your eyes adjust to the comparatively dark interior you gradually focus on the array of colours and vibrancy of the paintings coverings the walls and ceilings. Mahakala, the protector of the Buddhist faith, is aptly positioned over the door, flanked by Palden Lhamo riding a mule to the left and the goddess Remati to the right in her robe of peacock feathers. Mahakala's stout figure is dark blue in colour, apart from the red palms of his hands and soles of his feet, and an ornamented tiger skin is draped around his waist. A shawl with Sassanian roundels near their ends float down from his shoulders. He is surrounded by a border of flames, and is shown trampling on an outstretched man with a yellow-coloured beard.

The main attraction of the Sumtsek lies in the three colossal bodhisattva sculptures set into three niches on the ground floor, with intricately painted lower garments (*dhotis*). Made of clay with a wooden frame, they are about four metres high, their heads reaching up to the second storey of the temple. On the left is Avalokiteshvara – his body is white, but the palms of his hands are red. Clay sculptures of four fierce protective deities and two flying goddesses are fixed into the side walls. His *dhoti* is covered with a palace and about thirteen different temples; it is said that the paintings on this sculpture represent important locations in, and perhaps near, Srinagar. On the back wall is Maitreya, his face is gilded and his body is yellowish in colour. He is attended by four goddesses and deities hover above his head. His *dhoti* is covered with figures of the Mahasiddhas, devotees of Buddha. The Mahasiddhas are shown engaged in different activities, some are alone or else accompanied by consorts or disciples with whom they are conversing. Some are seated in meditation on antelope skins, surrounded by flames; others are shown in ecstatic dance while some are carrying instruments of daily work such as a hoe or a pestle. On the right wall is Manjushri, his body is red, face gilded and head adorned by a five-pointed crown. His *dhoti* is covered with roundels, each chronologically depicting the stages of Buddha Sakhyamuni's life. From his birth from his mother's, Queen Maya's, right hip to him being bathed by the two naga kings (Nanda and Upananda), and secretly leaving the palace at night the legs of his horse supported by deities so his departure is silent.

Apart from the figures in the niches, the rest of the walls are resplendently painted with various figures of Buddha, bodhisattvas, deities, patrons of the construction, aristocracy and the common folk.

The two parts of the wall flanking the sculpture of Avalokiteshvara are covered with rows of 814 small figures of the Buddha Amitabha, seated on a throne, with peacocks on either side. The five different colours used correspond to the symbolic colours of the five iconographic families: blue, white, red, yellow, and green.<sup>3</sup> There is also a larger figure of Amibabha on the centre of the two walls. The one on the left wears a Kashmiri style gown and strings of pearls around his neck; below him is a panel that shows the seven jewels of a universal monarch, from left to right: the wish-granting jewel, the horse, the minister, the wheel, the queen or wife, the elephant, and the general. It is from these seven jewels that the eight auspicious symbols later developed into the set we are familiar with and that which is widely used in Buddhism developed.<sup>4</sup> Probably one of the best known paintings in the Sumtsek is that of the voluptuous Green Tara, seated cross-legged on a lotus base in front of a white moon disc (Figure). She has six arms – her right arms hold a staff, rosary and form the varada mudra; her left a book, decorated vase and form a mudra. She is clad in a *dhoti* ornamented with mounted bowmen and overlapping animals, wearing an extremely rich crown and jewellery.<sup>5</sup> The central Tara figure is surrounded by four more Taras.

Another important feature of the Sumtsek is its ceiling. When looking up at the ceilings, upon first impression they look like they are covered by real textiles as the weaving and dyeing techniques have been realistically represented by the painters who decorated the wooden panels.<sup>6</sup> The ceiling of the Sumtsek consists of forty-eight panels which reproduce textiles of various techniques of manufacture, some of which were produced in Ladakh others that came in through trade, such as brocade, lampas, and embroidered fabrics. The textile patterns

which cover the ceilings are also shown on royal garments in the wall portraits in the Sumtsek, providing confirmation that these reproductions of textiles were not a figment of the painters imagination, but that they were in actual use at the time when Alchi was being built and decorated or at least they had been seen by the artists in the eleventh century and later.

Sometime after the mid-sixteenth century Alchi was probably abandoned, though the reasons for this are not known. The very fact that Alchi has survived is quite fortuitous, especially when there has been so much destruction and warfare in lower Ladakh during the Dogra invasion of the region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, today Alchi is in urgent need of restoration as the building and paintings have been damaged by rain and other natural elements.

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<sup>1</sup> That Rinchen Zangpo was a prolific temple builder is acknowledged; he is said to have built 108 monasteries using the skills of the Kashmiri craftsmen he brought to Ladakh and Tibet. The monasteries attributed to him with a high degree of certainty are Tholing and Nako in western Tibet, Nyarma and Sumdo in Ladakh (Goepper Roger. 1996. *Alchi, Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary – The Sumtsek* London: Serindia Publications. Pp. 14-15).

<sup>2</sup> Another inscription at Alchi mentions the restoration and conservation of the Sumtsek and its paintings under the supervision of a priest called Shesrab Sodnams, during the reign of King Tashi Namgyal (1555 - 1575).

<sup>3</sup> The five colours: green, blue, red, white, and yellow correspond to the five elements: wood, water, fire, iron, and earth, respectively.

<sup>4</sup> This is the pair of fish, the jar or vase, the umbrella or parasol, the wheel, the endless knot, the banner, the conch, and the lotus.

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<sup>5</sup> One of the most conspicuous features in this painting is the projection of her eye which is further away from the viewer beyond the outline of her face. This technique can also be seen in the murals at the cave temples at Ellora (8<sup>th</sup> Century) and in manuscript illustrations of the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. This also develops into a characteristic of Jain manuscript illumination.

<sup>6</sup> The copying of textiles in paint on the ceilings may derive from the custom of fixing actual pieces of cloth under the ceilings of Ladakhi buildings, partly as embellishment but also for the practical reason of preventing dust or mud particles of the ceiling construction from falling into the rooms below. This practice continues to be followed in most homes in Ladakh today.