

BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF LO MONTHANG

**Based on an interview with
Marcia R. Lieberman
conducted by Shebar Windstone**



In March 1996, the World Monuments Fund announced its first annual World Monuments Watch List of 100 Most Endangered Sites representing the world's cultural heritage. The sites included Thubchen and Jamba, two Tibetan Buddhist gombas (temples) in Lo Monthang, the capital of Mustang, which is a semi-autonomous district within the kingdom of Nepal. In May 1996, the World Monuments Watch, in conjunction with American Express, the project's founding sponsor, announced sites that would receive initial preservation grants. Unfortunately, the Thubchen and Jamba gombas were not among them.

Inclusion of the temples on the list is important because this helps put them on the map. For reasons of history and geography, they were not well-known at all. Getting this recognition identifies them as part of the world's heritage of great art and architecture. They are important in themselves because they are magnificent examples of Tibetan paintings of several different styles and, also, because so little work of equivalent quality has survived in Tibet, where over 95 per cent of the gombas were destroyed during the Chinese occupation, their statues destroyed and paintings defaced. So these are among the few surviving exemplars of that magnificent culture and period of art.

People interested in Tibetan art were to some extent aware of them, even though Mustang was closed to the outside world until 1992. One of the greatest Tibetologists of the century, Prof. Giuseppe Tucci, did get permission to go up into Mustang, briefly visited some of the temples there, and mentioned them in a short description he wrote of Mustang (*Journey to Mustang*, 1952), which whetted our appetites for this. I learned about them from a Nepali person who had been sent up there to do development work.

Mustang was an independent kingdom until the 18th century, when it was taken over by a neighboring small kingdom. Eventually all that territory came to be part of the state of Nepal when it was unified in the late 18th century. There were a lot of petty states or kingdoms in the area between Tibet and what is now Nepal, and these more or less settled out into one of three countries: Tibet, Nepal or India. But Mustang has been allowed to

retain its own king and queen, who have a limited amount of jurisdiction over some areas of life.

Nepal is one of the ten poorest nations in the world. The king of Nepal is Hindu, and the people in power are mainly Hindu. Because it's sandwiched between India and Tibet, Nepal is ethnically and religiously more or less Hindu to the south and Tibetan and Buddhist to the north. But the political and social élite are southerners, because the cities of Nepal are along the southern part of the country. So while it's fairly tolerant of Buddhism (although some people would dissent to that), it is not a Buddhist state.

Mustang was closed until 1992, in part because it is so close to the Tibetan border. If you look at a map, you see that Mustang protrudes upward beyond the usual borderline of Nepal, like a little thumb sticking up into Tibet. It was used by Khampa guerrillas as a base against the Chinese during the 1960s and '70s. The CIA supported these guerrillas and funded their activity. They were, of course, Tibetan freedom fighters who crossed the border and located themselves in Nepal, making raids and attempting to carry out the fight from there. So it was very sensitive and delicate, and the Nepali government remained anxious about border crossings and about any activity that would endanger their own security vis-à-vis Tibet and the Chinese. Probably mainly for that reason, it was closed, although other remote areas of Nepal were also closed until quite recently, and are still restricted. Mustang is still a semi-restricted area. Travel is now allowed, but it's limited, restricted and monitored in a way that travel in most other parts of Nepal is not.

My husband and I didn't have trouble getting in, but access is limited to 1,000 foreign visitors a year. We first went in 1993 and, in order to go, we had to get a permit in advance, and to travel with a liaison officer. Sometimes the liaison officer is termed an "environmental officer." One of the concerns of the Nepali government is to preserve local culture, and they don't want to let a flood of Westerners and Western influences and commercialism into these remote areas. They want to control very much the rate at which change will occur. So the liaison officer is supposed to make sure that visitors abide by a code that includes such rules of conduct as "Don't give candy to the children and turn them into beggars," "Don't take out religious artifacts, old statues or paintings," "Don't deface or defile or leave trash on the trails."

To reach Lo Monthang, we flew by twin-engine plane to the nearest airstrip, which is at the little town of Jomsom. You can either reach Jomsom by trekking up the Kali Gandaki canyon, or you can fly in. That shortens the trip. From Jomsom, you have to either walk or go by horse. If you walk, as we did, it's about a six-day trek up to Lo Monthang. It is possible to fly by helicopter directly to Lo Monthang, but that's very rarely done, for several reasons. It's very expensive.

And also, you don't get altitude acclimatization. You're plunked down at almost 4,000 meters (13,000 feet) and that's sort of a shock to the system. So almost nobody does that,



just ambassadors and notables and government officials who are being taken on day tours. A small number of Nepalis work in Mustang with agencies like CARE and Save the Children. A few Nepalis who are interested in seeing Mustang will trek up there. The rules that apply to foreigners don't apply to them; they don't need a permit or a liaison officer. They stay in local houses, which we can't do. Foreigners must provide their own tents.

Like other villages there, Lo Monthang surrounded by wonderful green fields, all owing to irrigation. People can live there only because they're able to irrigate. Upper Mustang is a high-altitude desert and, wherever there is no irrigation, the landscape looks something like the American Southwest. It's extremely dry and, as you go further north, it looks almost like Grand Canyon territory, with eroded canyons and flat-topped mountains. There are also snowy-looking mountains in the distance.

Lo Monthang is a medieval walled city made of mud brick. I'm not sure that anyone could really say with authority how old it is. The temples were built in the late 14th or early 15th century. I'm not sure that the people themselves would be able to tell you how much older the town itself is; no doubt it predates the temples by hundreds of years. There's one old, wooden gate through the wall to the town, although a few people have cut passageways to their houses through the wall. Within the town, the so-called "streets" are really like lanes. They're unpaved; during heavy rains (which are rare), they turn to mud. But most of the time, they're just dusty lanes. The mud brick houses are sometimes whitewashed, and built quite close together.



There has not been electricity to date, although this year the American Himalayan Foundation proposed introducing electricity into Lo Monthang using underground cables rather than overhead wires. This is perhaps a controversial procedure because, although it sounds as if it will be environmentally more appropriate in order to preserve the character of the town, underground cables set up various problems, such as the potential for short-circuits. The power source would be a hydroelectric generator.

People have no running water in their houses. There are a couple of water taps in the town, and people have to take their cans and go out to collect water from the taps, or they'll go down to the river, which is a couple of hundred feet below the level of the town. So all water has to be hauled back into the houses. There are indoor latrines but, of course, no plumbing. Lack of safe drinking water and the absence of plumbing combine to affect the general health of the population.

There is no telephone in the town yet, except for a radiophone in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) office. That's a branch of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, a non-governmental organization which oversees and promotes

small-scale development work in Mustang and some other areas of Nepal. The only other link to the outside world is a radiophone in the police check-post.

There is no wood because, although it is said that the area was once forested, it is now really a high-altitude desert, and there are no trees. ACAP has started some small plantations of trees that they're reintroducing, which they think should be able to survive in that climate. For fuel, people collect and bring home baskets of animal-dung pellets.

So there has been until now no electricity (although, as I said, that might change), no telephones, no television, no plumbing, no running water. There is a little primary school — I think it goes up to eighth grade — just outside the wall. And also, the monastic community recently opened a school for young, novice monks, where they learn Tibetan and, basically, how to be monks. There's a third gomba, called Chhoedi, in Lo Monthang, which is newer than the two I'm concerned about, maybe 17th or 18th century. That's where the monastic community actually lives and mostly works. This little school for novices is located on the grounds of that monastery. I haven't seen anything for nuns.

According to local legend, the gombas were established in the late 14th or early 15th century by the king of Lo Monthang, together with his prime minister and a Sakyapa abbot named Ngorchen Kunga Zangpo. Although there were also Nyingmapa monks in other villages, the Sakyapa were the predominant order in 13th century Mustang, and in Tibet as well. In fact, it was Sakyapa leaders who converted Kublai Khan and the Mongols to Buddhism. In return, they were given temporal authority over Tibet for a period back then. In the 14th century, the abbot founded the great Sakyapa monastery called Ngor, which, until its destruction during the Cultural Revolution, was considered one of Tibet's artistic treasures; he subsequently was involved in establishing the two great gombas of Lo Monthang. It is quite likely that he brought some of the same artists to decorate the temples in Lo Monthang who had also worked on Ngor monastery in Tibet.

Lo Monthang was an important, independent kingdom, because it is on one of the major trade routes between Tibet and the south. There are a number of passes that make travel across the Himalayas possible, but this route offers somewhat easier access. There was a lot of trade, with salt and wool coming down from Tibet and rice and other goods being sent up from India and what is now Nepal. The kings of Lo Monthang grew rich because they straddled this trade route and were able to tax trade, and they decided to spend a great deal of their treasure building these two gombas, which were major undertakings. When visiting Lo Monthang and seeing these two temples, which are just a hundred yards apart, it's as if you went to a French town and found, not one, but two cathedrals. Most towns would not be able to afford two cathedrals, wouldn't even have thought of it. These places are the Buddhist equivalent of



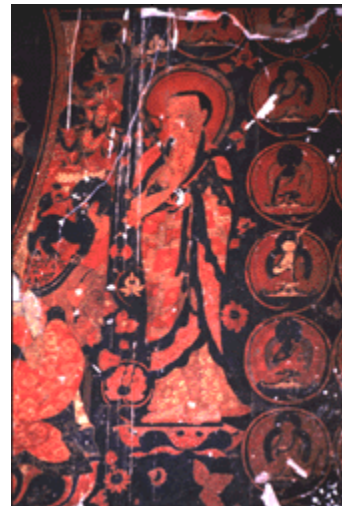
French cathedrals.

The local townspeople can and do use both Jamba and Thubchen, although the gombas aren't in daily use in the same way that Chhoedi is, because the monks actually live at Chhoedi. But they are used, they are tended, they both have altars with butter-lamps and other articles that are used to pay homage or show devotion, such as bowls of water. I have seen a ritual ceremony performed by monks in Thubchen. The prayer flag in the courtyard of Jamba is changed annually. And certain rituals are held there as well.

Thubchen and Jamba are both very large structures, very imposing. Both are made of mud brick. It seems that Jamba was built first, and Thubchen just a few years afterward. They represent different aspects of Buddhism, and this is brought out by both their architecture and the painting. Thubchen, which means essentially "large Buddha," represents, as it were, the philosophical — almost the more rational — side of Buddhism, and Jamba the more mystical side.

Thubchen has a skylight that brings light into the center of a great prayer hall, which is painted with a series of large Buddha figures flanked on either side by bodhisattvas. A bodhisattva is a conception of a being — sometimes of divine origin, sometimes of human origin — who, although ready to achieve enlightenment and transcendence (best known by the term "nirvana" in the West), has instead made a vow to remain behind and endure endless cycles of birth and rebirth in order to help all other beings achieve enlightenment. So the program of painting in Thubchen is this series of large Buddha figures flanked by bodhisattvas. They are very elegantly painted in a classical, courtly style, with some Chinese influence.

Typically, bodhisattvas are depicted in the jewels of Indian princes, and they are beautifully bejeweled and benecklaced with elegant earrings and elaborate necklaces and so on. They're exquisitely delineated. It is thought that Thubchen was painted a few years after Jamba, surely by teams of artists; because the paintings are so large, you can actually see that they're the work of different hands.

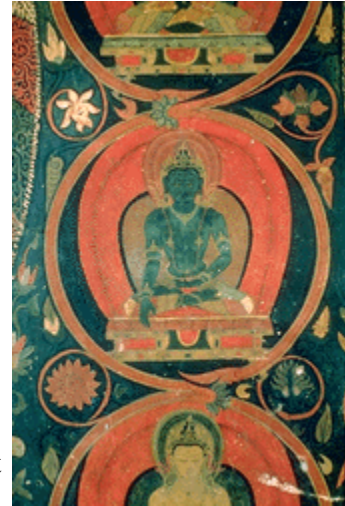


Jamba is the Tibetan name for what in Sanskrit is called Maitreya. The Buddhists developed the concept of a series of great buddhas, and Maitreya or Jamba is the buddha-to-come. Westerners sometimes think it's analogous to a messiah, but it's just based on the idea that the world has gone through and will go through certain huge cycles or ages, and so Jamba is the buddha still to come.

Jamba is built in three stories. The main prayer hall is at the middle level, and it is entirely painted with mandalas: two rows of mandalas on all four walls. It has, in the center, a gigantic statue of Jamba. The base of the statue is set in a smallish basement room, but the torso protrudes through a little well in the ceiling up into the main prayer hall. It's painted gold and, until recently, it was the largest statue in Nepal. The only light

that enters the main prayer hall in Jamba is through the gomba's one door. There's no window, and no skylight in the prayer hall. I'll discuss the upper level later.

The main prayer hall is painted with two registers of large mandalas, each at least five feet in diameter, some larger. Between the large mandalas are smaller mandalas and set in the little spaces between all of those are even smaller depictions of deities in vignettes placed within little oval-shaped medallions. There are flowering vines intertwined up and around these little vignettes or medallions, with images of flowers in various places along these vines. At the base of one wall, there's also a small frieze of protector deities. A lot of gold paint was used, which really flashes out at you when you direct a light on these in the dark. It's difficult to see them in the dark; you need to bring a flashlight or something. We don't know, of course, how the painters worked in a dark space like that — whether the ceiling had not yet been put on and they were able to work in daylight, or whether they had servants who held torches or lamps. It's quite remarkable. The ceiling is very high, so they had to work on scaffolds of some sort. They painted on dry, primed walls using mineral and vegetable colors.



A mandala looks like a very intricate geometric form based on symmetry. The simplest kind of mandala would be a circle, but usually it has a series of concentric circles or squares. Some of the mandalas in the Tibetan school are very intricate indeed, with an outer circle containing an inner circle or square, which contains another inner circle, which may have an inner square and then another circle within that. So the mandala displays layers and layers of these squares and circles, always with a circle on the outside, and always completely symmetrical, elements which are basic to the conception and the design of the mandala.

The mandala is a device that was very highly developed in the branch of Buddhism that predominates in Tibet, Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. The mandala became a device by which the adherent or practitioner could attempt to achieve a desired spiritual condition or state by a set of mental and spiritual exercises based on recreating within the mind what the mandala symbolizes. The mandala is sometimes described as being a "cosmic diagram" and, also, literally represents a blueprint of the palace of the deity. While the mandalas that we're talking about are two-dimensional, because they're painted, there are three-dimensional mandalas as well. A very great example of this is the ruin at Borobudur, in Indonesia, which has also been placed on the [1996 List of 100 Most Endangered Sites](#). It is a series of circles and squares of a huge Buddhist shrine, a place of worship, built on a grand scale. If you



look at it from the air, you see that, in its configuration of concentric circles and squares, it is a mandala in shape, and it's also built up in a three-dimensional structure. The mandala can be considered the dwelling-place of the deity who presides in that particular mandala. And the mandala can be keyed in to a particular spiritual exercise, a particular set of steps that a practitioner might use to achieve a certain state or condition. When using a mandala, the practitioner will go through these steps. Typically, the outer circle depicts a conventionalized image of fire, which has been interpreted to mean various things. The practitioner will pass through that fire to a circle within that may contain vajras or thunderbolts. The vajra, or dorje in Tibetan, represents a thunderbolt or a diamond: something indestructible, indefectible, symbolic of a truth that is eternal and cannot be destroyed. Within that, there may be another circle with some deities present.

There are four gates that are the entryways into the central part of the mandala, and they actually look like blueprint pictures of gates. They're often sheltered, with a painted image of a parasol — which may symbolize royalty (the king would be protected by a parasol) or may remind us of the ancient link between royalty and the priesthood. There are also strings of jewels, decorations, pairs of deer symbolizing Deer Park (where Buddha gave his first teaching), and maybe a golden disk, another symbol of the Buddha's teachings, which represents turning the wheel of the law. And sometimes there may be grotesque little figures that allow the artist to give some rein to his imagination. The adept makes his or her way through these outer circles, which represent the mundane, phenomenal world. Sometimes, but not always, the outer circle of the mandala will contain pictures of cemeteries, charnel grounds, severed limbs torn apart by wild beasts who frequent these places and other such images. After passing through the outer circles, the practitioner may enter the palace of the deity through the gates, and then pass through an inner series of concentric circles and squares containing other manifestations of the central deity, or which may be attendants or supporting images to the deity depicted in the center of the mandala, who represents the spiritual state that the practitioner is hoping to achieve.

Different practitioners may identify with or seek as models different emanations of the Buddha. It appears that all the mandalas in the main prayer hall of Jamba have to do with Vajrasattva, but a mandala could depict any one of a number of important Buddhist figures or concepts. Some people maintain that these deities are not to be considered as real in themselves, as having any objective reality, but are ways of representing these spiritual states. Others believe that they have a kind of reality. Certainly, in my experience, the country people believe them to be real.

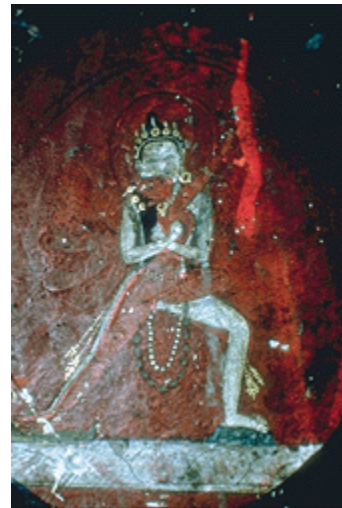


The Tibetan Buddhist pantheon is far too complicated to go into here, but essentially Tibetans conceive of three levels or tiers of transcendent beings. There is the type of buddha, such as Sakyamuni, who was born and appears as a human being. There's a mid-

level of dhyani buddhas, a concept of a buddha on a higher plane. And then there's a third, higher level, a concept of a primal buddha, who's beyond reach. At the mid-level, the dhyani buddhas are often conceived of as four directional buddhas: a buddha of the north, south, east, and west. They're depicted in different ways; each can be identified by, for example, its color, the positions of its hands and which attributes it is holding. It's very conventionalized: the buddha of the south holds a wish-fulfilling jewel, the buddha of the north holds a different object. And then in the center, there's a presiding buddha — depending on the school of Buddhism, sometimes considered to be Vajrasattva, sometimes a similar deity. But the same concept applies to all of them: a central buddha in the middle of the mandala, presiding over those four directional buddhas. In the case of Jamba, it appears to be Vajrasattva.

The bottom level of Jamba, where the statue is based, faces a courtyard with beautifully carved wooden pillars. The middle level is raised above the ground; it rests on a sort of apron of dried mud, and is reached by an external set of stairs. The only way to get into the upper level of Jamba is by bringing a ladder and climbing through what appears to be a window, which probably used to be a door. There must have been a superstructure up there that crumbled, nobody knows how long ago. So today there are no stairs to reach the upper level; it is virtually inaccessible. Because of what the third level is, it's possible that it was always reserved only for special initiates. It's also possible that the mid-level was only reserved for initiates. But we don't know that.

The upper level is completely tantric. Tantrism is a special development of Tibetan Buddhism. Sometimes it's described as a method devised to bring more rapid enlightenment; so that, if you can correctly follow the path of Vajrayana, which is tantric, instead of having to endure hundreds of cycles of birth and death and rebirth you might be able to achieve enlightenment in one lifetime. Vajrayana uses some symbols that are specific to Tibetan Buddhism and are really the invention of Tibetan Buddhism, for example, the *yab-yum* figure, which shows a man and woman copulating. The male figure is interpreted to represent compassion, and the female figure is interpreted to represent something that's sometimes translated as "wisdom," sometimes as "insight." The idea behind all this is that the only way to achieve enlightenment is by the union of wisdom and compassion, insight and compassion; and the most effective means of depicting this union was through a picture of sexual union.



The upper level of Jamba is painted all around, on the four walls, with one register of mandalas, all of which are tantric. At the center of each one is a *yab-yum* figure. The color scheme on this upper story is different, mainly black, red and gray with silver, whereas the main level is multi-colored — very brilliantly colored — with greens and blues and purple (faded over the course of centuries). They appear to have been painted by different sets of painters.

Jamba conveys a tremendous energy, partly because of the design of the mandalas, the forms filled with inventive design succeeding each other. Especially in the great prayer hall's great series of mandalas, with mandalas between them and the vines intertwining all around and all the medallions, it's bursting with life — it sort of pulses. And in each mandala, there's this marvelous, inventive form within a form, filled with characters and with gods and the energy which, I would say, is characteristic of tantric practices.

The mandalas are marvelous in the invention of their design, with wonderful intricacy. Of course, each one is different throughout the whole place. There's a lot of damage on the upper level, because one-third of it is open to the sky. Two-thirds are covered by the roof, but one-third is open. One wall is almost gone, the paintings almost completely destroyed, due to rain and snowmelt. The other walls have paintings that are visible, but the damage is much greater up there. It's still a fascinating set of mandalas.

There is nothing equivalent to this work anywhere else in the world. Of course, there are other murals of mandalas but, as far as I have been able to learn, Jamba is the only surviving Tibetan gomba that's entirely painted with mandalas. Entirely. Not just one corridor or one chamber, but both the main prayer hall and the upper space (which may have been a hall once upon a time) are completely painted with mandalas. That appears to be unique.

Thubchen and Jamba gombas are desperately in need of restoration. This needs to be, first, architectural conservation, so that structural problems are solved. The walls need to be stabilized. The problem of leakage from the roof — rain and snowmelt — has to be solved before we can turn to the paintings. And then, subsequently, the paintings need to be cleaned and restored, as much as possible, in order to preserve them.

I told the local townspeople that I would do everything I could to help them preserve their heritage. I had worked with and through the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, and also was asked by them for help and told them that I would do everything I could to find funding and expertise.

Then I located Prof. Frank Matero at the University of Pennsylvania, who is one of the leading specialists in the world on historic conservation, particularly of earthen structures, which is what these temples are — they're mud brick, which is like adobe. He's director of the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation and of the Architectural Conservation Laboratory at the university and, for several years, has been in charge of restoration at Mesa Verde in the American Southwest, which is an important Indian adobe ruin. We're fortunate that he agreed to participate in this project, because he is one of the best experts at doing careful and sensitive restoration of precisely this kind of structure.

As for conservation of the paintings, some of the most skilled people in the world in that field are Italians, who also have medieval and renaissance murals that they have been able to successfully restore. That would be at a subsequent stage, after the buildings themselves are secured and stabilized. I've been asked whether it's appropriate for

someone who's not a monk to work on such paintings. In my opinion, anyone who has the skills necessary for restoration — which will include a knowledge of chemistry and all the kinds of difficult questions that go into preserving paintings — is more qualified than someone whose motivation is purely religious. This is not about creating new art, but preserving old art — not changing it at all. One of the things that we're most worried about would be repainting or overpainting, as has been done in a gomba in a village called Ghiling in Mustang, that was overpainted a few years ago. Tucci had referred to its wonderful 17th century wall paintings, and it was overpainted — and ruined. Somebody (quite possibly monks) came along and painted over the murals with garish colors and crudely formed figures, and destroyed them. So the mere fact that you have a monk doesn't mean that he's qualified to do restorations. And restoration is different; we're not talking about repainting or touching up; we're talking about careful cleaning and conservation of what exists.

We also plan to train local people to continue to maintain the temples. The King Mahendra Trust will be involved in this work in an administrative and liaison capacity. We applied for and have been awarded a Getty grant. The Getty Grant Program is highly prestigious and is very selective in its awards. This is a mid-level grant, not enough to complete the restoration, which will take several years. Getty grants require that there be a training component with the work, to train local people. So the grant proposal includes a program to train Nepali students and local people in conservation work and preserving the buildings and the paintings.

I'm afraid to see how much damage has been done since I was last there. Without help, these temples won't survive much longer. I understand that last summer was very rainy. The more rain, the more damage to the paintings. It's like a clock ticking. Every day that it rains or that snow melts, a few more inches of wall under the hole in the roof are lost; and more precious details, exquisite details, in the paintings are washed away each year. And as more paint flakes off and more of the mud is exposed, the roof may collapse. There's a lot of anxiety in the local community about losing the structures entirely. They're very much afraid of collapse. The beams and wooden columns, which are very ancient, are rotten. If we get in there, we would do some immediate emergency repairs as well, to keep things standing pending final restoration. Fortunately, the type of Getty grant we got permits some funding for immediate emergencies.



There's one other wonderful little gomba in Mustang called Luri, which is even older. It's a small cave-temple, a jewel, with a small number of wonderful paintings that are, again, unique. They have more Indian influence. And this place also badly needs restoration. We had to limit our proposal, so Luri wasn't included. But it's another project I'd like to get to before it's too late.

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Marcia R. Lieberman, Ph.D., is a visiting scholar in the Department of Visual Arts at Brown University. She has traveled extensively to remote and secluded areas in India and Nepal researching Tibetan culture. Her area of special interest is Buddhist art. She and her husband, Dr. Philip Lieberman, have completed a photographic documentation of Buddhist temples and wall paintings of Mustang and now are working on conservation projects in the region.

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