



Houses of Devotion on Top of the World

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



The monasteries of the ancient Buddhist kingdoms of the Himalayas (Tibet, Bhutan and, in India, Ladakh) present a unique and fascinating building type. The topography and natural environment found in this part of the world are some of the most extreme and challenging found anywhere, and the architecture has evolved in response to that as well as to strong cultural and religious tradition. Tibet has always been the heart of the branch of

Rangdum is in one of Ladakh's highest valleys accessible by a (just barely) motorized road. **Rangdum Gumpa, Ladakh** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 7¼x10) captures the region's majestic peaks, capped by year-round glaciers, which dwarf the monastic structures, however grand they may be. The temple hall is a typical red color; the monk's cells are the white buildings to the left of the hall. When I visited in September, the temperatures dropped below freezing at night, and a few weeks later a blanket of snow covered the valley, closing the road for the winter.

CONDUITS & MARKERS



Prayer flags and banners frequently adorn monasteries, connecting one structure to another, as seen in my painting at left. They're believed to allow the sacred energy of the Buddha to flow from its statue to the worshippers. These multicolored beacons may also fly from high peaks, marking the sacred setting of a monastery, as seen in my sketch below.

LEFT
Small Monastery Above Thimpu, Bhutan
graphite and watercolor on paper, 10x13¼

BELOW
Lamayuru Banners, Ladakh
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x16¾



Buddhism called Mahayana, and its influence spread throughout the neighboring mountainous regions.

IMMERSED IN TRADITION

Historically, the core of each local community was the monastic order, a group of monks (usually male) who gathered at the feet of their teacher, or lama, as disciples. Beginning in the eighth century, the traditions spread throughout the region as communities expanded and members departed to

form new groups. The architectural embodiment of these communities is the monastery. These timber and plaster structures combine temple halls, where devotees gather to pay respect to the many statues of Buddha displayed there; accommodations for the monks; and in the case of Bhutan, administrative offices for the region. Most monasteries also had a defensive function of controlling and protecting the local region from intruders. Thus, they're situated below strategic mountain passes or along important routes. From the exterior, they present an

austere impression, with battered massive walls, small windows, a single entrance—often with a drawbridge and defensive gates—and broad overhanging roofs for protection from the infrequent but soaking rain. Within the walls, a series of courtyards edged with balconies and rickety stairs lead to the various public and private areas.

A visit to the region can often be organized around festivals held at the monasteries, drawing crowds from around the region and the world, and offering performances of traditional dance and music lasting many days.

ROADSIDE SHRINES



A chorten, also known as a “stupa,” is a shrine structure built of mostly solid masonry with a small chamber that holds a relic of the deceased person being venerated. The warm earth tones of the landscape are often punctuated by clusters of these white roadside shrines.

LEFT
Lamayuru Chortens, Ladakh
graphite and watercolor on paper, 7¼x11



BELOW
Lamayuru Valley Mountains With Chortens, Ladakh
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x8

My own sketching trips to the various regions have taken in these spectacles.

FORCES OF CHANGE

Like many long-standing institutions, these monasteries struggle to maintain their upkeep and traditions. The challenges imposed by the environment

stem from the extremely high altitude, which produces short summer growing seasons, and vast expanses of arid plains, relieved only by occasional rainfall and verdant river valleys and oases.

The remoteness of this region has spared it from the rapid cultural change that has overwhelmed much

of the modern world, although that’s quickly changing. Since 1950 and the Communist revolution in China, Tibet has lost its autonomy and has been steadily resettled with ethnic groups differing from the indigenous populations. Recently, the autonomous region of India, of which Ladakh and Muslim Kashmir are parts, has been



ABOVE
Leh is the historic capital of Ladakh. The earth and timber structure shown in **Leh Fort and Palace, Ladakh** (graphite and watercolor on paper; 5x16) holds a strategic defensive position above the modern town, seen as a green carpet at the base of the valley.



LEFT
Once every 12 years, an ancient *thanka* (an ornate devotional painting on silk, normally kept rolled up) is brought out at Hemis monastery for a multiday festival. Devotees arrive from around the world. **Naropa Festival, Hemis Monastery, Ladakh** (graphite and watercolor on paper, 14x11¼) shows the crowds gathered in the courtyard and on the monastery roof to watch ceremonial dances and listen to music played on traditional wind instruments.

brought under direct control of the Indian Hindu majority government with the goal, it’s believed, of repopulating the region with Hindus from the south. Bhutan tries to preserve its heritage and cultural identity by limiting the number of visitors and maintaining strict controls on building styles and even on the traditional dress of its people. In this era of worldwide digital culture, however, one wonders how long such a bulwark against change can be maintained. ♣

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