

## *Sakya*

Zhang Xiaotao

Founded during the eleventh century, Sakya Monastery is typical of the fortress type of monastery which evolved from the earlier clusters of temples. The square exterior wall of protection was several meters thick at base, strong and solidly built. The vulnerability of the site required an architecture to house the population as well as provide protection from invasions and from natural forces such as seismic shocks. Thus inclined walls, broad and heavier at the lower levels to stabilize in case of earth tremors.

Zhang Xiaotao came to Sakya on a Buddhist pilgrimage. Sparked by his artistic genius and meditation, he worked closely with Zhang Jianlin, archeologist responsible for the historic reconstruction of this glorious monastery. As the archaeologist slowly explored the ruins to reveal the ground plan, a square with four square towers at the corners, Zhang Xiaotao explored within his meditations and his mind's eye revealed the sacred mandala palaces: the Buddha and Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom. The Khon family, founders of Sakya, are hereditary emanations of Manjusri. From the mandala of the Buddha and Manjusri, surrounded by 8 lotus flowers evolves the Leonardo da Vinci silhouettes from which emerges the mandala of the human body. The human body, with the capillaries and arteries in constant movement of the blood circulation, which in turn becomes the mandala of the cosmos, whirling throughout the universe of the formless realm of consciousness. Only to revert through transient phases including destruction by fire and rebirth, eventually again taking form the human body and the Buddha bodies which govern the mandala palace by residing in the center of all phenomena. It is the perpetual challenge to focus in awareness and cherish the sacred teachings of the Buddha, as given in the books and by the lamas and monks as teachers. The final goal of Buddhism is not belief, but understanding. Indeed, it is Zhang Xiaotao's sharing of his higher vision of Buddhism in his work of art and consciousness, Sakya, and the multi-media of drawings, paintings and videos which emanate therefrom.

Historically, Sakya monastery is constructed in a plain near a small river beside the Ponpo Ri which has white earth giving the name to the monastery, Place of Pale Earth: *Sa* (earth) *skya* (pale).

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The Sakya monastery eventually had other divisions outside the surrounding wall of the fortress, such as the constructions against the hillside. The Sakya monastic school achieved political prominence during the Yuan dynasty in the thirteenth century to fourteenth century. Esthetically, the proximity of Sakya to the trade routes leading to the Kathmandu Valley lead to close ties between Sakya and Newar artists, evidenced by numerous commissions of sculptures and mandala paintings on the walls within the sanctuary.

— Dr. Amy Heller, July 2, 2021

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## **Amy Heller Biography**

Dr. Amy Heller teaches courses on the art and architecture of Tibet, the Himalayas, and Mongolia at the Institute for the Science of Religions and Central Asian Studies, University of Bern. Since 1986, she has been affiliated with the Paris CNRS Tibet team of the Center for Research on the Civilisations of Eastern Asia (CRCAO). 1974 BA cum Laude at Barnard College Columbia University (New York) in Art History, 1980 Diplôme de Langue et Civilisation Tibétaine at National Institute for Oriental Languages, Paris and 1992 Diplôme de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, IVe section, Philology and History, Paris. Visiting professor at University La Sapienza, Rome (2006, 2008) and Centre for Tibetan Studies, Sichuan University, Chengdu (2007-2013).

Her books comprise Tibetan Art (1999), Tibetan Buddhist Art 西藏佛教藝術 (2007), Early Himalayan Art of the Ashmolean Museum Oxford (2008) and Hidden Treasures of the Himalayas, Tibetan manuscripts paintings and sculptures of Dolpo (2009); edited books: Discoveries in Western Tibet and Western Himalayas (2007), The Arts of Tibetan Painting (2012 [www.asianart.com](http://www.asianart.com)) and Visual Culture of Tibet and the Himalayas (2020 [www.asianart.com](http://www.asianart.com)).

She did research in Lhasa at Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences in 1995 and 1996, then in Dunhuang and Qinghai in 1997. Travel for research in Nepal and Tibet as of 1999 every year until 2007, including the UNESCO project of the Swiss Government for the Ramoche Temple Roof Restoration in Lhasa 2004-2008.

She has collaborated on exhibitions of Buddhist art for Art Institute of Chicago, Musée Guimet Paris, Ashmolean Museum, Zurich University Museum of Ethnography, Yale University Art Gallery, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (Yale), Tibetan Collection of The Newark Museum and the Beijing exhibition Light of the Buddha organized by The Palace Museum, and The Zhiguan Museum of Art. She has done research on textiles for Abegg Foundation, Switzerland.