

A comparative study of wall paintings in Hunder Zimskhang and two other sites in the Western Himalayan region of Ladakh

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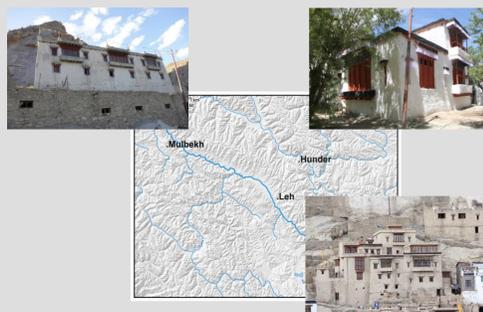
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Ladakh, a high altitude desert plateau between the Karakorum and Himalayan mountain ranges, was in the past an important transit region due to its strategic location. Its trade routes enabled not only commercial exchange, but also the dissemination of philosophies, religious and cultural transmission, and political and military expansion. This research focuses on an art historical and technical study of a mural painting 'Five Generations' in an old aristocratic house, 'Hunder Zimskhang', in the Nubra valley, north of Ladakh, and a comparative study with murals from two other sites, namely Munshi House in Leh and Kalon House in Mulbekh village (Kargil district). The study is based on extensive fieldwork as well as on the analytical work comprised of optical microscopy (OM), scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive spectroscopy (SEM-EDS), and spot and staining tests.



Map of Jammu and Kashmir
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Map of Ladakh with sites of interest
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Wall paintings in the western Himalayas are generally associated with Buddhist monasteries and temples. It was not a common practice to paint murals in houses except for a few aristocratic residences. The Hunder Zimskhang, the Munshi house and the Kalon house were the residences of noble families linked to the court of the Ladakhi King. The aristocratic families from Munshi House and Hunder Zimskhang were also connected through a marital arrangement between them.

The murals found in these three houses represent a rare type of artwork found in the region. The highlight is a unique scheme called 'Five Generations' *mi-rabs-nga*¹, the style of which is bearing signs of foreign influence. The murals portray a group of seven oriental featured people consisting of five men accompanied by a woman and a child with slight changes in the overall composition. The paintings appear to depict the noble families living in the houses¹.



'Five Generations', Hunder Zimskhang



'Five Generations', Munshi House, painted on two walls in the corner



'Five Generations', Kalon House

Dimensions: 113 x 232 cm

Description: The costumes correspond to the attires worn by the officials and noble men of Qing dynasty (1644-1911). There are depicted different types of robes with subtle motifs and design.

Other Chinese signs: The second figure from the left holds a fruit? (similar to Kalon house), probably a peach 'the symbol of longevity and immortality' in the Chinese art

Painting style: Elaborated style with an attention to the minute details suggesting a skilled artist/workshop

Condition: Painting in a dire need of conservation work (the building itself urgently requires an architectural conservation)

Dimensions: 130 x 150 cm, 130 x 90 cm

Description: The costumes have elegant designs and motifs typically found in the Chinese textiles; they are similar like in the Hunder Zimskhang-painting with slight variations in design

Other Chinese signs: Two men on the right are sitting on long-legged Chinese styled chairs

Painting style: The style and use of impasto technique (for jewellery and textiles) point to a skilled artist/workshop

Condition: Good condition; the paintings were restored in the recent past.

Dimensions: 90 x 120 cm

Description: The figures have a dwarfish appearance, they look disproportionate, the perspective isn't clear. The original colours are dimmed by the varnish applied by the owner 17 years ago

Other Chinese signs: Two figures hold Chinese folding fans (missing in the other two paintings); the male figure in the centre holds a fruit? (compare to Hunder Zimskhang)

Painting style: Aesthetically poor quality pointing to an unskilled artist

Condition: Fairly good; the descendants of the royal family are still living in the house



Hunder Zimskhang, green paint: earthen support (0), white ground (1), green paint layer (2)



Kalon House, green paint: earthen support (0), red ground (1), blue and green paint layers (P1,P2)

The technical study revealed the same simple layer stratigraphy as shown here in the OM-micrographs of the paint cross-sections: the earthen plaster, ground layer and one or two final paint layers. The only difference is the red colour of the ground in Kalon house, in the other two houses the ground is white. Pigments identified by SEM-EDS in these paintings – artificial ultramarine, vermilion, carbon black, chrome yellow – enable the murals dating earliest to the second third of the 19th century. The painting technique of all three schemes is a glue tempera.

Conclusion

The mountainous region of Ladakh once served as an important trading *entrepôt* between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia and Tibet. The opulence of Chinese symbolic influence in the murals present in the three aristocratic houses – Hunder Zimskhang, Munshi House and Kalon House – are examples of an amalgamation of various ideas and philosophies into these artworks, as result of this trade and cultural dissemination. While the composition of the 'Five Generations' scheme is similar in all three houses with minor deviations, the role of each figure in the paintings vary from one site to the other. Stylistically, the paintings in the Hunder Zimskhang and Munshi house have definite resemblances and appealing execution of the art works, while the paintings in Kalon House appear to be aesthetically poor in quality. Based on the pigment identification it was possible to date all the murals to the second third of the 19th century at earliest.

It is feasible to conclude that the 'Five Generations' painting motif was an important subject of the mural art amongst the aristocratic families between the 19th and 20th century.

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