

Charles Ramble

Art without Artists

Robert Powell's Mustang Collection

An old Tibetan manuscript from South Mustang preserves the words in which a legendary king is said to have addressed his four main household priests. The priests in question were specialists with narrowly defined roles: astrology, propitiation of particular spirits, the preservation of the king's vitality. »You four have now become my domestic chaplains«, he said to them. »So be it. You four shall not perform one another's offices, those duties that have not been apportioned to you. If you interchange your duties you shall pay me, your king, a measure of gold, and to my subjects a measure of silver«.

This royal edict is nothing more than a prescriptive formulation of a state of affairs that will be apparent to anyone who visits Mustang: that the beliefs and practices that make up a culture are not evenly distributed across a population. Mustang, of course, is not unique in this respect, and it is surely the case in most societies that specialisation of knowledge and action prevent any individual or group from having a monopoly on the overall picture.

But complexity is not just a horizontal affair; the patchwork of highly localised expertise is given a vertical depth in the form of value judgment. Allocating rank to domains of knowledge can be a very elaborate business, and varies from one place and time to another according to the prevailing canons of worth. But in its simplest formulation, this hierarchy is reducible to a twofold opposition between ›high‹ and ›low‹ culture. Defining exactly what is high and low isn't easy, and attempts to do this

with any degree of analytical rigour typically lead to the conclusion that there is no such opposition at all, or that the boundary between the two is so permeable that the categories are meaningless. Perhaps, but the makeshift categories with which we **organise** the world are not easily got rid of by scholarly evidence to the contrary, and we, like the people of Mustang, attribute values – high or low, sophisticated or rude – to the traditions that make up a culture.

Outsiders who have had dealings with Mustang enter the culture at a given point, and are unlikely to move around very much beyond that niche, for a number of reasons: what lies outside my particular field of interest is messy and confusing and I will very probably inherit the same tunnel vision as the local specialist in whose domain of knowledge I am interested. If I fell among astrologers, say, I would not learn much about rituals for propitiating spirits or preserving the king's vitality, since my hosts would not know very much about these things, and would reinforce my prior conviction that they are in any case not worth knowing about. A specialist in monastic art, or in a school of Buddhist philosophy will probably not consider the *Nibelungen*-life of villagers a subject worthy of serious attention; reciprocally, the anthropologist is liable to regard the philologist's stratospheric pursuits as being hopelessly out of touch.

History is sometimes lost – books can burn, even if someone has taken the trouble to write them in the first place – and its

remnants may be consigned to myth. In Tibet, megaliths and prehistoric remains are attributed to the adventures of Gesar, the hero of the Epic; the ruins of fortresses, tombs and great buildings in the Phungchu Valley (the Upper Arun) are said to be the work of a titanic race that flourished there before humans came. Most of Mustang's architectural remains are not so mysterious that the spectres of giants are raised to explain them. The kingdom was founded in the fourteenth century by a certain Amepal, who had once been a minister in the nearby Tibetan principality of Gungthang. The realm prospered under the rule of his descendants, who built and expanded the capital Lo Monthang, raised Buddhist temples and commissioned the finest artists to adorn them. The power of Mustang (which, for the sake of simplicity, let us take to be synonymous with Lo) was curtailed by the intervention of Jumla, which had risen to become the most powerful kingdom in what is now Western Nepal. When Jumla was in turn crushed by the Gorkhas at the end of the eighteenth century, Mustang, as one of its vassals, was incorporated into the emerging nation-state of Nepal.

The kings and nobility of Mustang were patrons of Buddhism, and most of the area's monasteries and sacred edifices are related to one or another subset of the Sakyapa, one of the four main Lamaist schools. But though the Sakyapa came to enjoy the role of something like a state clergy in Mustang, they stood side-by-side with other sects – the Kagyupa, the Nyingmapa and the Bonpo – whose tenacity owes much to their being tightly interlaced with the daily lives and pressing, worldly concerns of ordinary villagers. Even where the protagonists and followers of these schools have vanished, their memory is inscribed on the landscape. The origins of the surviving structures are erased, and we are left with a promiscuous legacy of which the only common feature is that it is all simultaneously *present*.

There is a convenient, but lazy, dogma in anthropology according to which the origin of a tradition or an institution does not matter; all that counts is what relevance it has to the living community (which may well have no idea of history). There can be no doubt that the trickle-down effect is a feature of the relationship between high and low culture, but quite apart from the existence of an equally significant 'evaporation' effect in the opposite direction, what actually trickles into the pond of supposedly ahistorical popular culture comes from a variety of different streams. Each of these waters may preserve its distinctive tint even in the common pool.

Let's take an example from one of Robert Powell's paintings. Look at (Fig. 1). Standing on the roof of the house directly above the door is a device known as Rigsum Gonpo, the 'Protectors from the Three Buddha-families'. The idea of 'Buddha Families' is an old one that proved especially useful when it came to imposing some order on the vast population of divinities that the Buddhist pantheon had to accommodate: a sort of egalitarian caste system. The eponymous Protectors are Mañjuśrī (red), Avalokiteśvara (white) and Vajrapāni (blue or black).

The trio are often represented more explicitly as iconographic depictions of the three in a row, cut into flat stones and placed above a doorway. More cryptically, as the familiar motif – commonly seen in the entrances of temples and noble houses

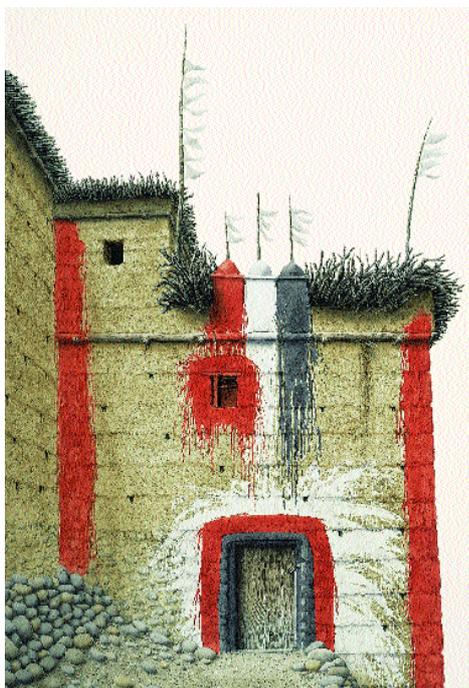


Fig. 1 House with Rigsum Gonpo, Tangbe.

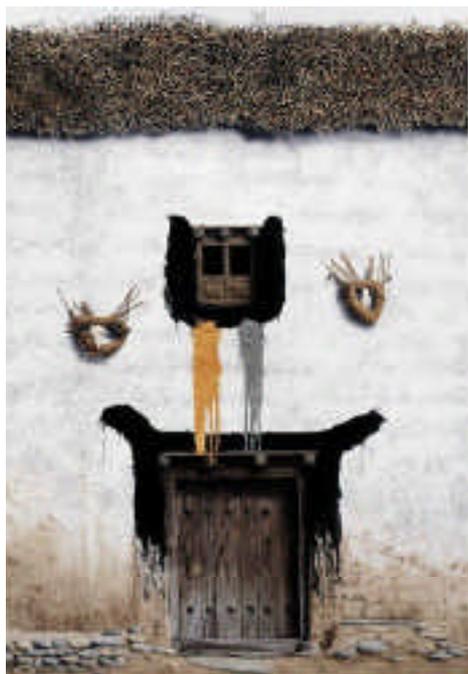


Fig. 2 Wall of the Protectors, Lo Monthang.

– of ›the Mongol Leading the Tiger‹, in which the man, the beast and the intervening chain do duty for the three gods. They are also seen as the sacred formulae of the three inscribed on scrolls of paper and housed inside prayer-wheels to be ›recited‹ at each turn or, most simply of all, vertical stripes on a wall. Now, if we are to understand what these motifs mean, it goes without saying that we should know something about the Triple Protector. But is this really *all* we need to know?

The tricolour scheme is itself not the monopoly of these Bodhisattvas, even among Tibetans; in an older classification, white stands for the celestial gods (*lha*), blue-black for the serpent spirits of the underworld (*lu*), and red for the *tse*n, the warrior-demons who inhabit the intervening space. The Rigsun Gonpo (in Fig 1) is ›correct‹ inasmuch as the divinities are in the proper sequence, that is Mañjuśrī on the left, Avalokiteśvara in the middle and Vajrapāni on the right when seen from the outside. Rigsun Gonpo are found not just on private houses, but around and in the public space of villages, where they have been set up to repel the general or particular evils that emanate from a given quarter. Disconcertingly, in Mustang, these constructions are often *not* the right way

around. My friend Niels Gutschow and I once made a short investigation of these protective devices in Mustang, and we would frequently ask questions about the bewildering range of variations we encountered. Some people said that the reversed orientation must be a mistake; others that the device was intended to protect the outside from the inside, or perhaps to stop the good stuff in the village from leaking out. Nobody had ever thought of this as a problem until we raised it, and I doubt if they worried about it for long after we'd gone.

Now look at (Fig 2). The Triple Protector here isn't red, white and blue-black but yellow, white and grey, yet the villagers still regard this as a Rigsun Gonpo. Red ochre is available at only one site in Upper Mustang: at the southern end of the section of the Kali Gandaki Valley called the Land of the Hundred Blind Dogs and Horses, in the territory of the city of Lo Monthang. Maybe the people preferred not to undertake the trip or pay the fee, and made do with their own resources, and a makeshift measure became established as a tradition. Or perhaps the use of yellow conforms to the older, Sanskrit sources that describe Mañjuśrī as being yellowish, rather than red,



Fig. 3 Mani Wall with Horns, Gemi.

in colour. Who knows? Whatever the case, we can see from (Fig. 3) that the Triple Protector is yellow, white and grey even when clearly there is access to red.

Part of the problem is that colours mean different things, as the example of the rival interpretations of red, white and blue suggests. In the village of Tsuk, the walls of some of the houses are painted from roof to ground with vertical red stripes (Fig. 4, and Pl. 141). This has nothing to do with warrior-demons or Mañjuśrī. It signifies that the house belongs to a family of Nyingmapa lineage-priests from the long-abandoned settlement of Tamshel. In a number of other plates, red appears as a decorative element on particular parts of houses; on doors, windows and along the angles of walls. In this case it denotes repulsion. Ghosts and witches would think twice before penetrating a red-painted entrance, and on the house-angles the colour emphasises what is anyway an intrinsically menacing shape. Tantric Buddhism classifies actions into four categories, each with its distinctive shape: the fourth of these comprises ›fierce‹ or ›destructive‹ actions, which are associated with triangles. This scheme merges with a more commonsense idea of the inherent danger of sharp corners to furnish houses with one of their many natural defensive traits. On a hill immediately to the north of Lo Monthang is an old castle that is said to antedate the city. The south and west walls of this castle do not meet at an angle, but merge in a broad arc. Perhaps this was how the wall was originally made. Defensive ring-walls are

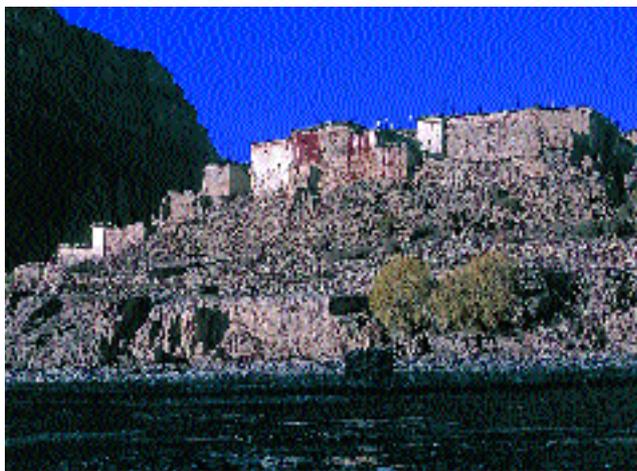


Fig. 4 The Kyangma section of Tsuk, showing a red-striped house of the Tamshel priestly clan. Charles Ramble 1995.

quite a common feature of settlements that were founded long before the arrival of Amepal and his cohorts. But practically anyone in Lo Monthang will tell you that there *was* originally a corner, and that the abbot of the now ruined monastery to which this corner points demanded that the king round off the angle to withdraw the implication of offence. Perhaps the story is true, perhaps it isn't; but it does tell us something about how the Buddhist clergy would like to see its own power and status with respect to that of a compliant monarchy.

It's possible that the wrong-way-round Triple Protectors mentioned above really are a mistake, but if so, then these mistakes sometimes become so complex that explanations in terms of digression from a correct Buddhist iconographic standard are quite meaningless. The most extreme example I know of is the village of Samar, which has a number of Rigsum Gonpo on its periphery. They are all different, not just with respect to the colours of the three main elements of each, but also the colours of their bases and their component sections. And the painting is not done by just anyone; one colour is the responsibility of young women, another of the young men, and so on. (I've never spent long enough in Samar to work out who does what to which structure, much less why.) The point is that the task of decorating these edifices may come to acquire more importance than the orthodox accuracy of the decoration itself. In the Muktinath Valley there is a set of three villages, which share certain communal grazing lands and ritual activities. Politically the most important in recent times was Dzar, since this is where there stands a now-derelict palace of the Valley's rulers. The other two villages are Purang and Khyinga, which occupy respectively lower places in the local social hierarchy. An early twentieth-century document from Dzar declares that the Triple Protectors of the settlement should be reconsecrated at the time of the spring Archery Festival, for which occasion the members of all three villages would gather in Dzar. For this purpose, Dzar would provide the white, and Purang and Khyinga, yellow and black respectively. The apportionment of colour is interesting, since it conflates the ›Sanskritic‹ scheme of the Rigsum Gonpo (yellow, white, blue-black) with the vertical-hierarchical ranking of the three communities (from top to bottom, white, red, black) implicit in their colour coding.



Fig 5 Three standing stones amid archaeological remains by a lake in western Tibet..Charles Ramble, 1999.

We find something similar in the village of Te, which has five Rigsun Gonpo on the periphery of the built and cultivated area. Te is organised into four named residential sectors; the responsibility of reconsecrating each of four of the sets lies with one of the sectors, while the fifth is maintained by the headmen. In Te, too, the colour schemes are all different, and a succinct statement about the purpose of the annual consecration would have more to do with the unity of the community, under the leadership of its headmen, against an unpredictable and dangerous outside world, than with invocations to Buddhist saviours; not least because the consecrations are accompanied by animal sacrifices to some very un-Buddhist blood-drinking territorial gods.

It could be argued that a proper knowledge of art history would reveal this state of affairs to be an inappropriate adaptation, to secular society, of a basic motif of Buddhist iconography. But is it certain that the triad of Bodhisattvas was really the point of origin for more or less complex arrangements of three mounds as a protective device? Not long ago, in one of the pastoral regions of Tibet, I happened to walk past a set of three stones on the alluvial fan of a dry gulley, and asked my companion what they stood for (Fig 5). He answered apologetically that this was the unsophisticated equivalent of Rigsun Gonpo used by his nomadic community to ward off hazards – in this case, the threat of destructive spates gushing down the narrow ravine in summer. So which came first, the

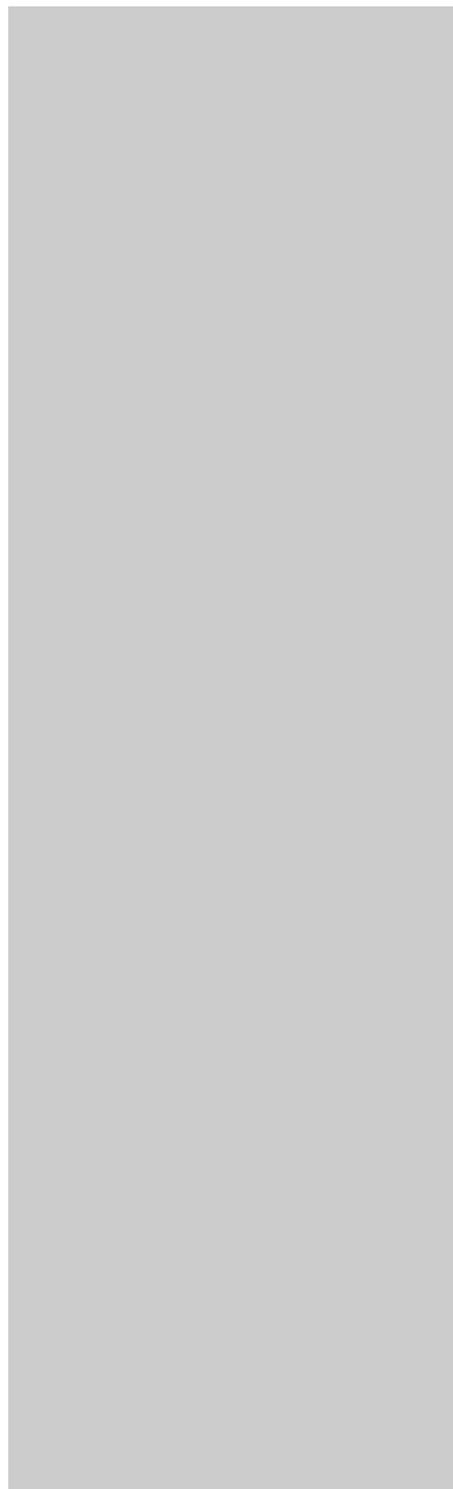


Fig 6 Examples of ritual arrangements of stones depicted on a long scroll from Ngari.

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idea of a symbolic barricade of stones or the scheme of three protective divinities? What is certain is that Tibetans have for a very long time been using patterns of stones to signify things within a range of desiderata that include steadfastness, security, durability, protection and so on. Some acts may be simple, such as the erection of a stele to accompany the swearing of an oath. At the other extreme is the highly complex, and to the best of my knowledge still unstudied, class of *tho* rituals that are still practised in parts of Tibet and the Himalaya. This illustration (Fig 6) shows a few examples of such patterns drawn on a long scroll from Ngari, in the western Himalaya. Apart from brief and rather cryptic names, the drawings have no accompanying written commentary, and I don't know if there is anyone alive now who knows precisely what they signify and how the rituals are to be performed¹.



Fig. 7 Gate of the Ancestors. Detail.

All we see on the landscape are arrangements of stone, earth, and sometimes wood, and even when the ideas that caused them to be there, or with which they were later invested, are still preserved among the people, they are not always easily got at. The abundance of the legacy, and our own constrained interests, mean that most of what is out there is so inconspicuous that we either don't see it or don't bother to ask about it. I don't know how many times I went past the old entrance to Taye (Tangbe), but it was only when I saw the painting (Pl. 124) in Rob's studio in Kathmandu that I noticed the menacing anthropomorphic figure, the 'Grandfather', moulded on its façade (Fig. 7). When I give presentations about Mustang, I illustrate a number of points with transparencies that are not of the subjects – Triple Protectors, houses, caves and so on – themselves, but of Rob Powell's represen-

tations of these subjects. Things can only be properly understood in context, but before getting to the context it's as well to know what the thing is in the first place, and the paintings achieve a museum-standard degree of decontextualisation that no photograph could ever accomplish. Experts may read a confusion of fossilised bones and footprints in Cretaceous soil in such a way as to determine how some creature lived, whether it hunted alone or in a pack and what it fed on, but it's only from the reassembled plaster replica bearing down on us in an exhibition hall that we get a sense of the elegance and power of the beast itself.

Other things simply can't be captured by a camera. The painting in Fig 8 reproduces the cavernous interior of the old part of Tsuk with an illumination that could not have been accomplished in this land without electricity. The cave complex containing the temple called Mentsi Lhakhang, seen with the artist's X-ray vision (in Pl. 134), obviously couldn't be photographed with the aid of anything less than dynamite.

The paintings have the character of museum exhibits in another sense, too. They are not just informative, but pleasant to look at. The exactitude of the reproduction tricks us into thinking that we should observe them with the same clinical detachment as convention once enjoined on frock-coated visitors to ethnographic museums. And then we remember that, unlike our grandfathers, we aren't obliged to hide our enjoyment.

It isn't always easy, in Mustang, to determine whether something was put there by people or by the elements. Walk past the same cliff a dozen times before a pattern of lines and surfaces

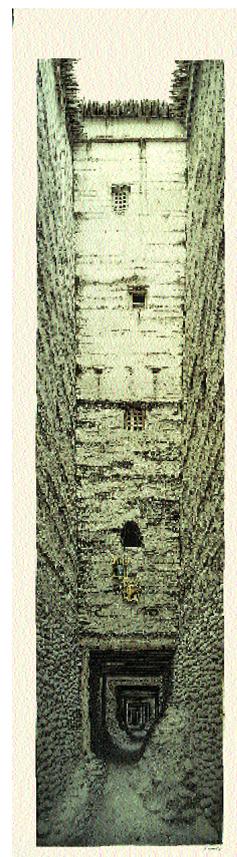


Fig. 8 The Passage through Tsuk.



Fig.9 The Dancer.

among the crags suddenly coalesces into a ruined temple, and you wonder why you never noticed it before. Trudge wearily up to a promontory to examine a well-preserved fortress that turns out, on close inspection, to be blocks of fallen conglomerates. The particular beauty of these things is not just that they straddle the boundary between artifice and nature, but that the softness of decay or some accident – such as the splashes and drips of the colours on the walls – have enriched the work beyond the original plan:an aesthetics of the unintended. The dancer (in Fig.9,detail of Pl.136) was surely very beautiful once,with exquisite features,bright jewels and fine,if scanty, clothing. The elements have robbed her of beauty and turned her into a silhouette,but she is more haunting than ever before, like the vanishing memory of someone we try, on waking, to pursue back down the corridors of a dream.

There is a curious alchemy that gives useful objects not only beauty but also a value incommensurate with their original worth once they have outlived their practical lives. Most of the objects represented – one might almost say exhibited – in Rob's paintings were ostensibly created with some function, not mere loveliness, in mind.Nearly all the decorative features of the houses in these paintings have some protective purpose. The complicated devices, constructed around the skulls of a sheep and a dog, above the entrance to the house (in Fig.2), are intended to keep the ›doors‹ of the earth and of the sky firmly shut. The Triple Protectors and the red corners have already been mentioned. The upward extensions to the dark

borders of the doors and windows (in Fig.2) are stylised horns, and real horns may also feature over doorways or at other vulnerable places in a village (Fig.3). This is a sober reminder that while Mustang may seem to us like a splendid place, the people who live there are braced against the real possibility of drought, flash-floods, and other natural hazards – landslides and earthquakes are merely the most spectacular – not to mention war and pestilence.

Some things that may look accidental are actually intended. Here is an example. Walls are still sometimes made of rammed earth, by filling the space between two planks with mud, letting it dry and repeating the process in a succession of vertical lifts. The planks are held in place by wooden pegs that leave holes when they are withdrawn, and these holes pock the surfaces of walls at the level of each lift – see, for instance, Fig.10, detail of Pl.124. The holes are left there neither out of carelessness, nor because they are thought to look nice, but to provide small birds with niches in which to nest. The owners of the house acquire merit by leaving the holes unblocked, and merit is, after all, the only real capital we have.

Cairns abound in the Mustang landscape, but they do not all mean the same thing. Sometimes the shape, or perhaps the location, will provide a clue, though not always. Rough cairns on passes are usually the accumulation of stones deposited as ›pass-tolls‹ (*laptse*) to the gods. Some signify the place where a



Fig.10 Gate of the Ancestors. Detail.



Fig 11 Heavily laden griffon vultures after a funeral. Charles Ramble, 1985.

particular god abides, or to which he may descend from his mountain halls to receive offerings. Others may be the markers of an invisible trail. Shepherds sometimes spend their idle hours raising simple heaps of stones, and explain that these are intended to serve as perches for vultures and eagles, which can lift themselves in the air from flat ground only with difficulty. (In fact the ruined walls of castles and other monuments are sometimes referred to as *jakhyung babsa*, 'landing-places for Garudas.')(Fig. 11)

But it's hard to avoid the suspicion that people raise the heaps first, and only later come up with a reason for having done so. It is as if the savagely vertical topography had impressed itself indelibly on the brains of people who inhabit it, compelling them to reproduce it in small ways. Perhaps the same is true of

the decorated houses that look like nothing less than the palettes of concentrated colour from which the landscape itself was painted.

In his short essay ›A piece of chalk‹, G.K. Chesterton made a similar reflection about the natural fountainheads of European art. He set off one Sunday afternoon to sketch the English countryside:

But though I could not with a crayon get the best out of the landscape, it does not follow that the landscape was not getting the best out of me. And this, I think, is the mistake that people make about the old poets who lived before Wordsworth, and were supposed not to care very much about Nature because they did not describe it much.

They preferred writing about great men to writing about great hills; but they sat on the great hills to write it. They gave out much less about Nature, but they drank in, perhaps, much more. They painted the white robes of the holy virgins with the blinding snow, at which they had stared all day. They blazoned the shields of their paladins with the purple and gold of many heraldic sunsets. The greenness of a thousand green leaves clustered into the live green figure of Robin Hood. The blueness of a score of forgotten skies became the blue robes of the Virgin. The inspiration went in like sunbeams and came out like Apollo.²

Footnotes

¹ I am very grateful to Tenpa Yungdrung, the abbot of Triten Norbutse monastery in Kathmandu, for permitting me to photograph the scroll.

² Chesterton, G.K. 1992 [1927]. ›A piece of chalk‹. In W.E. Williams (ed.), *A Book of English Essays*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 217.