

School for traditional art



A view of **Choki Traditional Arts School**

By SONAM PELDEN

From the earliest known examples of mural paintings to the art of the present day, painting has flourished as a

prevalent art form throughout the country. Almost everything gets painted, from walls to animals and people. Within this genre are many forms and styles that fall into both sacred and secular categories.

The painting school is a unique institution where drawings, paintings, sculptures and art history are explored in depth. Embodying an attitude of seriousness, dedication and commitment to the rigors of becoming an artist, the school's

demanding programme develops the student's personal vision by a thorough examination of his or her perceptions.

Choki Traditional Arts School was started in 1999 at Kawang Jangsa, next to the Zorig Chusum School by Choki Dorji. He had been in the field of painting for more than 40 years and after his retirement from Zorig Chusum school, where he was the Director, he had a few underprivileged students taking painting lessons from him. After sometime he formally started a school for those students.

In 2003, the school was shifted to Kabesa, Thimphu. Basic courses like drawings, *thangka* paintings and carving are provided to the students,

which is a six-year course. The students undergo six months of theory classes and four months of practical. During the practical period, they go out of the school to gain experiences in paintings and carving jobs.

"After completion of six years, they can extend their stay for another year to clarify any doubts they have. This is a kind of specialisation *course* for them," said Sonam Choki, proprietor of the school. After four months of stay in the school, they are kept at the Choki Handicraft in Thimphu to get further coaching from the resource persons from the Zorig Chusum School and Department of National Property. This is mainly to develop the skills and confidence level of the students, she said.

To understand Bhutanese paintings, one should know that it has always been torn between three mainstreams movements - Chinese, Japanese and Western. Paintings may evoke an association with landscapes and natural scenes drawn with a few genial brush strokes. The impression may come from the majority of the scroll paintings that are to be found in galleries and museums. But it is only a part of the story.

The only supporter and the donor of the school is the Himalayan Youth Foundation which has provided them with hostel, washroom and bathrooms. It is still the major supporter of the school. Currently there are 42 students in the school. They are all boys and performing pretty well.

Most of the students come from underprivileged background who don't have any means to support themselves. The works of the senior students are sold to the public and the amount collected is used to support the juniors. By the time the students reach third or fourth level, they become quite skilled and are hired by many people. That is how the Art School is being sustained.

"I enjoy learning here and I have learnt quite a lot. I would like to specialise in painting in future. Our teacher guides us very well," said Migma Khandu, a first year student.

Till 2005, everything was free for the students. They only had to pay NU.100 for fees but as the student

you want to learn more about it. Different painting schools and styles, a variety of different media, the deep roots in Buddhism and the use of specific terms from the Bhutanese language make this art form not always easily accessible for Westerners.

A third year student, Ngawang Gatshen from Mongar who has specialized in carving said that he wants to make products and sell in future. He has already sold a few during his winter breaks. After completing class VI, his interest in carving is what dragged him towards this profession and he has no regrets.

Kinley Tshering, a fifth year student said, "I have painted many *thankas* for the school but haven't



Practical class

gains more skills in their work, they tend to leave the school for other jobs. and the sustainability of the school gets reduced; the policy of the seniors supporting juniors becomes low. Therefore, in 2006 the school came up with a new policy. The new comers have to pay 32 percent of the total budget spent on them a year by the school which comes to NU.9000 per year. The fees are reduced once the students go to the next level and so on.

The art of Bhutanese painting is full of mesmerizing Asian charm when you look at it from a purely decorative view. But it is also a subject that can be a bit confusing for novices when

sold any. I want to continue with the painting job and I am thankful to my teachers and the proprietor for making me able to stand on my own feet."

"Our plan is to make the school function independently. If possible, we would like to bring down the fees as most of our students are from the underprivileged families and we are hoping to give equal opportunities to the girls as well," said Son am Chokio. With adequate budget and funding, and more professional teachers, the school also hopes to introduce more specialized courses than they are providing now.

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