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Museum am Rothenbaum

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ALCHI – MONASTIC JEWEL IN THE HIMALAYAS Monumental Photographs

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Detail of the Green Vasudhara/Tara with the typical Kashmiri stylistic device of the averted eye reaching over the head. Alchi, Sumtsek temple © Peter van Ham

The Buddhist monastery Alchi, located at 3500 meters in Ladakh (Northwest India), is the best preserved temple complex in the Himalayas. It houses thousands of paintings from the 11th century, which are among the earliest and finest examples of Buddhist art. Their state of preservation is unique, but also increasingly endangered. In 2017, photographer Peter van Ham received a unique special permit from the Dalai Lama to photograph Alchi's works of art in the highest possible resolution. The Museum am Rothenbaum is showing these artworks in the special exhibition "Alchi: Monastic Jewel in the Himalayas - Monumental Photographs" in almost original size. Buddhist sculptures from the museum's collection complement the show.

Alchi's detailed and miniature-like wall paintings provide fascinating insights into the spiritual and secular life of medieval Kashmir and Western Tibet. Their influences range from India and Tibet to Central Asia, Iran and Ancient Greece and show on the one hand the cosmopolitanism of the Buddhist teachings, and on the other hand document supra-regional connections and territorial claims of the builders of the temple-site.

Van Ham's photographs not only capture the richness of detail and colour of these murals in the highest possible resolution, but through infra-red photography almost faded and overpainted inscriptions re-appeared and became readable. In cooperation with the Tibetologist Amy Heller, new research findings were obtained from these inscriptions according to which the foundation of Alchi may now be safely dated to the end of the 11th century - two centuries earlier than previously assumed by a small group of researchers. The decisive clue was provided by the deciphering of an inscription which links the West Tibetan king Wang De (1080-

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1093) with the construction of one of Alchi's early temples. He introduced Buddhism to the region by building the monastery at this then important intersection of international trade routes between India, Tibet and Central Asia. As a result of this dating, other temple foundations culturally and historically related to Alchi must now be reclassified in terms of time.

Another important research result was the analysis of wall paintings and texts in Alchi's oldest temple, which show and denote women in the rank of the highest enlightenment - something that in Tibetan Buddhism was previously considered reserved for men only.

Today Alchi belongs to the Tibetan Buddhist religious group of the Dalai Lama, the Gelugpa. About 30,000 tourists visit its world-famous temples during the short summer season. This enormous influx, combined with the effects of climate change, causes damage to the paintings. Also in view of the extensive destruction of Tibetan culture in the heartland of Tibet itself, the conservation and restoration of the few monasteries still preserved in India is of great importance. The exhibition aims to raise awareness of the uniqueness of this place and the need for conservation measures.

Peter van Ham's photographs are complemented by a small selection of sculptures that highlight the spread of Buddhism. An assortment of exhibited butter lamps of more recent origin and from various regions also remind us that Alchi is still a centre of daily religious practice.

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