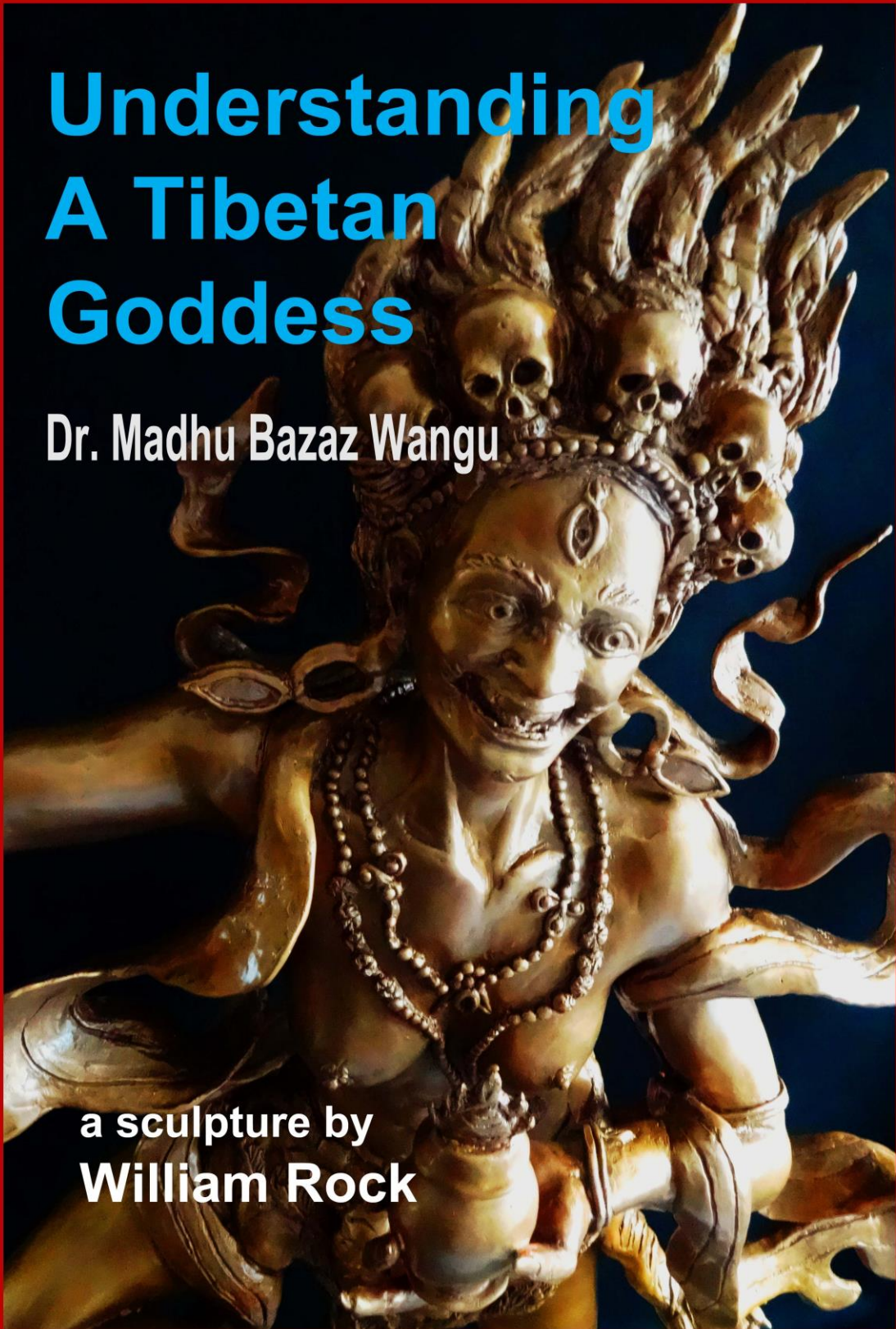


Understanding A Tibetan Goddess

Dr. Madhu Bazaz Wangu

a sculpture by
William Rock



UNDERSTANDING A TIBETAN GODDESS Ferocious and Enlightening

The bronze sculpture of the Tibetan Bon goddess Yeshe Walmo is William Rock's recent work. Rock is an internationally recognized artist who has studied and taught with Tibetan and Chinese monks as well as artists, writers, and poets of the various spiritual and philosophical disciplines. The work, created with masterly skill and complex techniques, was completed in 2016. The present essay is a modest attempt to understand and appreciate the sculpture and the symbolic teaching that her iconography conveys.



Yeshe Walmo, bronze, 36 x 14 x 9 inches

The Artist

Like most creative minds, William Rock trusts his intuitive feelings and insights as he creates his art works. He is a self-taught painter and sculptor, and a voracious reader. Over twenty years ago, having painted for many years, Rock had a deep desire to teach himself to make sculpture.

“I was attracted to the human figure as I studied sculptural masterpieces in museums and outdoors in various cities. I taught myself to sculpt by studying original works around the world and the history of sculpture—from *The Venus of Willendorf* in Vienna to Michelangelo’s *David* in Florence to Rodin’s *Thinker* in Paris. I developed a genuine insight into form and light and what makes sculpture come alive. Following that, I studied Eastern art and sculpture and learned the differences in creative approaches to form. Then for years I focused on making sculpture.”

In the late nineties, William Rock met the reclusive American Buddhist nun Ani Drubgyudma. They enjoyed a long friendship. Often, they would discuss Buddhism and its practices. His conversations with her led him to live and practice Buddhism with Chinese monks and nuns on farmland in rural Missouri. They practiced the Chinese *Chan* sect of Buddhism.

“That experience had a profound impact on me. It was no longer about what I had read in books. I was actually experiencing the way of the monks. We practiced a strict meditation and did extensive physical labor. The daily routine took me out of my head real fast.” Rock reminisced.

In 2007, Rock met Tempa Dukte Lama, a lama who is ordained in the Tibetan Bon tradition. Rock recalled,

“Tempa Lama and I had an instant connection. He is an artist and a poet. We became very good friends and over the years I attended many teachings offered by Tempa Lama and other Tibetan Bon masters.”

Rock explained how the Tibetan Bon culture is rich and extensive. 'Bon' means 'Boundlessness'. Its essence is said to be the truth that lies within everyone and everything, pervading throughout time and space. Bon originated within the ancient culture of the Zhang-Zhung civilization of Tibet. It is shamanic in origin and pre-dates Buddhism in Tibet by thousands of years. Through centuries, Bon and Buddhism have influenced one another but the Bon religion has its own specific deities and rituals. Its meditation practices and study of mind and human condition are highly sophisticated.

One day Tempa Lama, who had painted an iconographic image of the Bon supreme goddess Yeshe Walmo, suggested that Rock sculpt her image. He said although exquisite paintings of Yeshe Walmo existed *in situ* and in museums, a sculpture of the goddess did not exist.

Rock pondered over Tempa Lama's suggestion of sculpting an iconographical image of Yeshe Walmo as prescribed by the Bon ancient texts. It was going to be a formidable task. It had to be precise and meticulous.



Painting of Yeshe Walmo by Tempa Lama

But it didn't take William Rock long to accept the offer. It was an opportunity for him to bridge Eastern and Western cultures through his art. He had to honor the way Yeshe Walmo had been perceived for centuries, and at the same time he wanted to bring a Western aesthetic to the piece. Rock said,

“I also designed and sculpted an intricately detailed flame to be cast in bronze and placed behind the sculpture. First and foremost, I wanted to be true to the Bon tradition. Imagery and visualization is a huge part of the Bon belief-system. The monks know every part, every detail of the deity.”

It took William Rock over three years to learn the Bon visual and symbolic language and create and cast the sculpture. When the sculpture was exhibited in the presence of His Holiness The 33rd Menri Trizin, The Worldwide Spiritual leader of Tibetan Bon, this is what he had to say:

“You are very important that you made this Yeshe Walmo sculpture. It is very special. It is made from the highest area of the mind. We visualize Yeshe Walmo our whole lives and could not make this but you have made it. It is hard to believe a Western person could make this. This is a masterpiece.”



His Holiness The 33rd Menri Trizin with William Rock and the Yeshe Walmo sculpture

“His Holiness Menri Trizin’s words were an authentication of the sculpture at the very highest level of the Bon tradition. It meant a lot to me.” Rock said.

The sculpture has also been embraced by Western audiences. In 2017, it was exhibited at The Maridon Museum near Pittsburgh.



Yeshe Walmo, by William Rock, The Maridon Museum, 2017

Sculptural image of Yeshe Walmo created by William Rock

William Rock's Yeshe Walmo is depicted dancing on an inverted fully blossomed lotus. Her flaming crown is adorned with five grinning human skulls. Her earrings are like floating ribbons of flame. A third eye is depicted in the middle of her forehead. Her eyes are wide open. Her smile is terrifying, her fangs visible at the corners of her lips. The prominent sinews of her neck end at the protruding collar bones. Two jeweled necklaces overlap the collar bones. She wears bracelets and anklets on her wrists, upper arms and ankles. Her limbs are muscular as are the rest of the parts of her body. Her breasts are partly covered with the vase of healing elixir she holds in her left hand. Undulating scarves around her body blaze like flames. Her abdominal muscles and gentle curve of the belly suggest influence of Western realism. The head and skin of a tiger is wrapped around her buttocks and hips and tied in front. This is further adorned with plaits of peacock feathers. The Tiger's tail is visible between her legs. The goddess also wears a snake around her waist. In her right arm, she brandishes a flaming sword, and in her left a flaming vase overflowing with healing elixir. Her right leg is drawn up with the sole of her right foot facing the onlooker. Her left knee is slightly bent, and her left foot is placed firmly on the lotus.

The image carefully follows the description of the goddess as described in the ancient Tibetan religious texts. Taken individually each symbol has meaning and together they depict human life as it is and how it should be lead. Her wrathful mien and terrifying paraphernalia is to jolt her devotees. The five grinning skulls that adorn her crown symbolize the impermanence of life. The flaming sword in her right hand, slashes and burns the negativity of the five poisons. It also destroys individual ignorance.

The snake symbolize life, death and rebirth. It sheds and grows new skin the way humans shed their bodies at the time of death and are reborn. The vase of elixir is to remove and heal physical and emotional afflictions.

The five poisons of the human mind are ignorance, anger, desire, jealousy and conceit. They need to be shed like the peacock sheds its iridescent colorful plume. While the physical eyes see through the veil of five poisons, the third or wisdom eye (in the middle of her forehead), sees the reality. The awakened wisdom eye points toward the path that is free from the five poisons and shows the reality as it is.

The fire emanating from the various parts of the image, simultaneously symbolizes destruction of evil and the seeding of the awakening of wisdom in a devotee's heart. The goddess's dance symbolizes the unbound joy that the devotee experiences when the ignorance is removed and insight gained. With afflictions removed the goddess showers inner joy and bestows security and confidence in the heart of the devotee.

When the meaning of Yeshe Walmo's image is internalized by her devotee, the goddess gradually discloses herself to him or her. She offers a doorway to spiritual transformation and personal freedom.

Ferocious Appearance

Yeshe Walmo's nudity and ferocious mien jolts the onlooker. Her nakedness and ferocity mocks at those passive and fainthearted who continue to see the world from behind a veil of ignorance. The grinning skulls, the snake, tiger skin, flaming sword,

scarves and ribbons all point toward fragility and impermanence of human life. Together they shake up those who slumber in ignorance and refuse to wake up from their illusion. Without the goddess's frantic dance there is no cosmic movement. Without it change is not possible. To experience the divine, confronting fear is a significant step that leads the devotee onto the path of freedom.

Visualizing Symbolic Image of Yeshe Walmo

The function of the symbolic language in art is to reveal fundamental truths about life. These truths are not immediately evident to a casual observer. Their meaning remains hidden until the devotee reaches a threshold of comprehension and clarity. When that threshold is crossed, the goddess's raw power imbues in the devotee's heart. Yeshe Walmo makes one aware that life is fleeting. That death must be confronted boldly. And life must be lived joyously and blissfully.

Life is not to be looked at as fragmented into terrible and benign, creative and destructive, male and female but as unified totality. Accepting both terrible and sublime is to balance the totality of life, and to live as fully human. The realization that positive is meaningless without embracing the negative leads one through a portal to enlightenment.

Yeshe Walmo is qualified with powerful attributes which are expressed in symbols such as her posture, gestures, embellishments, weapons, emblems and animal images that accompany her. These symbols of energy are imbued with meaning.

During the daily ritual of “looking at” the image, called visualization, the devotee/practitioner focuses one by one on the symbols of the goddess. He keeps their meaning in mind until he feels their essence in his own body. Each day he makes an attempt to connect with that essence. His intention is to patiently cultivate the goddess’s attributes and embody them in himself. With daily visualization, as his relationship with the image builds up, the practitioner strengthens his resolve to become like her. In time, he is able to internalize its meaning with the same interpretive skill that is brought by the reading and interpretation of a scripture. Always, his intention is to imbibe in himself the meaning concealed in the image.

The ritual of visualization involves three steps. Intention, concentration, and action. The practitioner makes an intention to remove the ignorance that he knows afflicts him. During the ritual and for the rest of the day he stays connected with his intention by keeping it in his mind. At each moment, he is reminded of his promise to himself. Whatever happens during the day, he makes sure that all his actions are grounded in what the goddess expresses through her symbols.

In the three stages of intention, concentration and action, he unifies his knowledge of symbols and his understanding of the goddess. He feels his physical and emotional afflictions gradually alleviating. What the body feels, the mind reflects and the heart experiences. Once he overcomes the poisons in his mind, a pilot light is lit in his heart that heals his whole body. He experiences the joy of dance.

The practice of visualization is like a burning flame that clears away evil and afflictions. When the practitioner and goddess are one there is simply no room for

afflictions to arise. The attributes he embodies result in his self-confidence and courage. The more he practices the more empowered he becomes.

In Conclusion

It took William Rock three years to create the Yeshe Walmo bronze sculpture. The time spent tested his endurance, persistence and skill. Deep within the making of the sculpture, Rock's belief in art, the artistic process and spirituality was affirmed. He realized that an artist is not alone in the process of creating a work of art. The art work informs the artist as much as the artist informs it. Somehow in this process both embodied the wisdom of the goddess.

Yeshe Walmo invites the viewer to reconcile all parts of the human condition, with skillful means, fierce love, courage and a compassionate heart. It is with these same attributes that William Rock created this sculptural masterpiece.

Dr. Madhu Bazaz Wangu is an author and the founder of Mindful Writers Groups. She has published several books about Buddhist and Hindu art and goddesses. Her fiction includes collections of stories and novels. In addition, she has original CDs, "Meditations for Mindful Writers."

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William Rock's Website: <http://www.williamrockart.com/>