

THE *art* OF

# children in

exile

BY  
KITTY  
LEAKEN



▲ PORTRAIT

## DURING THE WINTER MONTHS,

Kathmandu overflows with new arrivals from Tibet headed for India, many of them children who left their parents behind—those who still had parents. Conditions on the Himalayan passes, some of which reach 17,000 feet, can be life-threatening and many arrive with frost-bite, starving, exhausted and frightened, after a journey of three weeks or sometimes as long as three months. Some are as young as six years old, and several have had to witness the death of siblings and friends on the trip through the blinding snow. Several hundred children pass through the Reception Center in Kathmandu each year, where they receive food, clothing, medical attention and identification papers before boarding a bus for India. During their two-week stay, they are invited to visit “Art Refuge.”

Art is a way for the Tibetan children to release the tension they are holding due to the repressive conditions of life in Tibet or the high levels of fear and stress from their journey out. The children are often shut down, shy and fearful when they reach India. Art is a way of drawing them out. They are encouraged to draw pictures of their homes and families, of crossing snowy mountains; one girl draws a winding path then flips the paper over, continuing it on the other side to show how far she has walked. Creativity and self-expression are the tools that help them make yet another, even more important journey: from ragged survivors in exile back to childhood, to become playful kids once again.

NEW YORK/KATHMANDU by *Tenzin Lobsang* (right)

Tenzin Lobsang lost his hearing during an illness when he was very young. Painting gives him the chance to overcome his handicap and he brings great concentration to his work. T. Lobsang, as he likes to sign his paintings, lives with his mother in Chakrata, India, near Dehra Dun. She is the sole supporter of the four children in the family as a carpet weaver in the handicraft center there. His father died during the India/Pakistan war in Leh, Ladakh.





# art IN

# exile

Art Refuge provides a similar service in Dharamsala, India, when the children arrive, and in 1999, they brought the project to Sri Yasodara Orphanage in Sri Lanka, a home for over 60 girls, aged three to eighteen, who have lost their parents to the country's bitter civil war or the extreme poverty it has created. The girls are from both sides of the war and live with the haunted memories of violent murder, terrorism and fear.

Art Refuge is funded by the America-based Friends of Tibetan Women's Association (FOTWA), headed by Sarah Lukas. They can be reached at (505) 988-1938 or visit their website: [www.fotwa.org](http://www.fotwa.org). Many of the children's paintings are featured in a book, *The Art of Exile: Paintings by Tibetan Children in India*.



▲ MOTHER



◀ MYSTERIOUS SMILE  
by Tashi Dondup

Tashi Dhondup escaped from Dingri in Tibet with many other children during the winter of 1985. He went to school in Dharamsala and now lives in Nepal with his uncle, and struggles to find employment. He would like to make painting his life's work.

MOM, DAD AND ME ▶  
by Thakchoe

Thakchoe was born in Tsosho, Tibet in 1979, he thinks. He has four brothers and arrived in India in January 1986 when he was seven or eight years old. His parents do field work in their village in Tibet.

Thakchoe does not remember much of his home, but recalls that his parents grew radishes and that they had two yaks and a cow.

This is a very early Thakchoe painting. It is an idealized image of his family, as he does not remember very well what his parents look like.





art IN

# exile



▲ LEGS

▶ FRIENDS OF NATURE *by Niluka*



▲ BURNING HOUSE  
*by Shyama*

Shyama made this painting about her friend Lalitha's experience. A Tamil girl living in the north of Sri Lanka, Lalitha's family house was set on fire when her father was suspected of being an enemy sympathizer. Villagers came to rescue them from the burning house, but Lalitha never saw her father again.

▼ **HAPPY DREAM**  
by Dorjee Gyaltzen

Dorjee Gyaltzen was born in June, 1976. He attended Central School for Tibetans in Bylakuppe, the Tibetan settlement where he was born in south India. He then went to school in Kalimpong because of family problems but had to return because they could not afford to keep him there. Back in Bylakuppe with no work and nothing to do, he had a difficult time. He became infected with tuberculosis. After a few months of treatment he improved and in 1996 began a 5-year course in oil painting. He longs to become an art teacher and to earn his living creating commissioned art pieces.

In **HAPPY DREAM** Dorjee returns in flight and fantasy to his Tibetan homeland of sacred mountains and monasteries above the clouds.



▲ **YAK**

