



KEN PARKER

Flipping through the large, immersive photos in *Tibetan Mustang: A Cultural Renaissance* is perhaps the next best thing to visiting the remote place yourself.

Dual Renaissance

A beautiful new coffee table book documents a secluded Himalayan kingdom.

By Agata Popęda

It takes a full week of trekking, 12,000 to 15,000 thousand feet up, just to get to Upper Mustang—the secluded kingdom in the Himalayas that hides monumental, cavernous Buddhist temples with massive indoor murals that are treasures of the Renaissance. It was Italian and French masters that taught locals to do *seccos*, those *frescoes* of the dry and arid climate.

“Crazy remote,” says Carmel-based landscape photographer Kenneth Parker, of the locale that inspired the biggest project of his life—20 years, four expeditions, at a cost of \$100,000. “But this is the place that is the last vestige of the authentic Tibetan Buddhist culture remaining on the Tibetan plateau that has not been destroyed by time, or by the Chinese.”

Parker remembers when “the last forbidden kingdom” opened to the world in 1992. It was all over the news and he was immediately curious, but had to wait 10 years. When he finally got to Mustang in 2003, he met Italian restorer Luigi Fieni, who was in charge of a gigantic restoration project—“20 years of cleaning with Q-Tips,” as Parker puts it—sponsored by the American Himalayan Foundation.

Now, Parker and Fieni are co-authors and co-photographers for a book

titled *Tibetan Mustang: A Cultural Renaissance*.

The large indoor paintings Fieni had been restoring were hidden to locals for centuries, covered with soot of yak butter candles from daily rituals. And yet the colors were still there; not only watercolors and oils but semi-precious, pure, ground mineral pigments—azurite, malachite, lapis lazuli.

“It’s a dual Renaissance,” Parker says, referencing the artifacts that come from the 14th and 15th centuries, as well as their physical rebirth.

Mustang never developed restoration methods, so Western techniques of cleaning and preservation came just in time. The controversial part was completing the damaged and scrapped paintings, but Parker says that the locals wanted their deities with complete body parts. The temples are not museums, he explains, but places of daily ritual.

“When the murals were unveiled, [the locals] were astonished and excited,” Parker says. “We restored the culture back to its ancestral roots.” ★

Tibetan Mustang: A Cultural Renaissance by Luigi Fieni and Kenneth Parker is available now. Two of Parker’s images from Mustang can be seen in the *Sacred Encounters* exhibit at the Monterey Museum of Art (on display through Dec. 17).

www.montereycountyweekly.com