

Thangkas – Paintings of Divine Beauty

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Abstract

Thangkas are spiritual paintings with great detail and symbolism, but the story of how these exquisite works of art are created and used, explains why they are so greatly prized and treasured around the world.

Keywords

Traditional, Buddhism, sacred, paintings

Introduction

Through the ages, Buddhism has given many beautiful art forms to the world. One of the most unique and treasured forms of Buddhist painting is the 'thangka' painting. A thangka is a sacred Tibetan devotional painting, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala, which is a symbolic painting of the universe. In Tibetan, the word 'than' means flat, and the suffix 'ka' stands for painting. A thangka is a painting done on a flat surface that can be rolled up like a scroll when it is not displayed.

Like all spiritual art, the original and primary purpose of thangkas was for religious instruction, and they were created as a focus for personal meditation, prayer, and rituals. Buddhists believe that meditating on a thangka will strengthen a devotee's concentration, help him to visualize a particular deity, and forge a link between himself and the divine. Thangkas are also believed to work as channels to earn spiritual merit and ward off hardship. If a devotee is going through tough times, a lama, or spiritual teacher, tells him which deity needs to be appeased. A special thangka is then custom made for the client, and the devotee worships this during his daily meditational practice. Historically, thangkas were also used as teaching tools to convey the lives

of various masters. A lama would travel around giving talks on dharma, carrying with him large thangka scrolls to illustrate his stories. Thangkas depict scenes from the lives of Buddha, important lamas, bodhisattvas, (a person on the path to Buddha hood) and other deities. The wheel of life, which presents the cycle of birth and rebirth to Buddhists, is also often painted in thangkas.

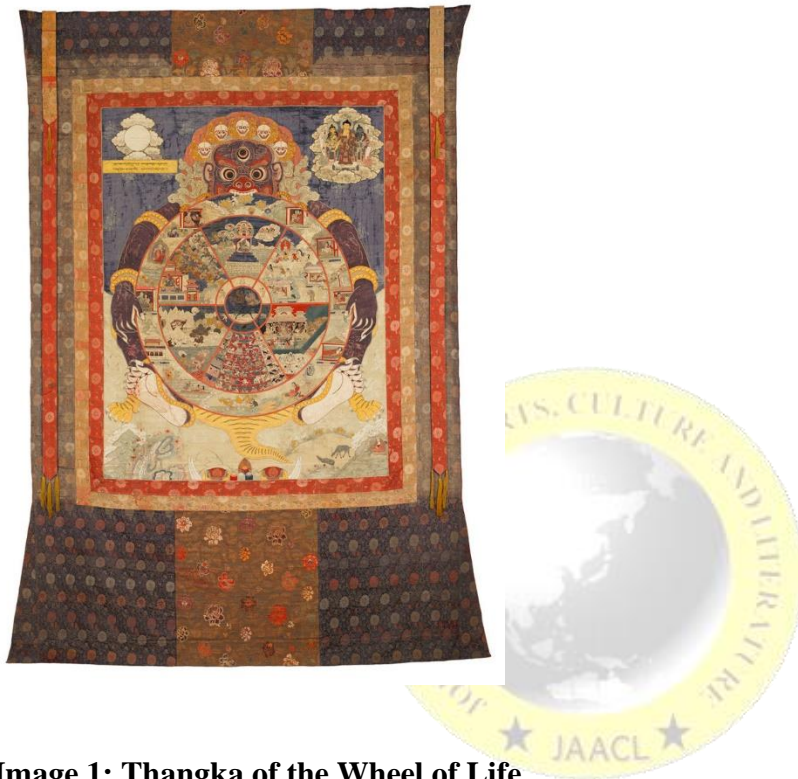


Image 1: Thangka of the Wheel of Life

Thangka art has its roots in the paintings that decorate the rock-cut caves of Ajanta in India and Mogao in China, and developed alongside the tradition of Buddhist wall paintings, seen mostly in Tibetan monasteries. Tibetan monks, the original creators of this exquisite, spiritual art form, have continued to be its main custodians because they have the skill and patience to create these colorful sacred paintings that are so rich in detail and symbolism.

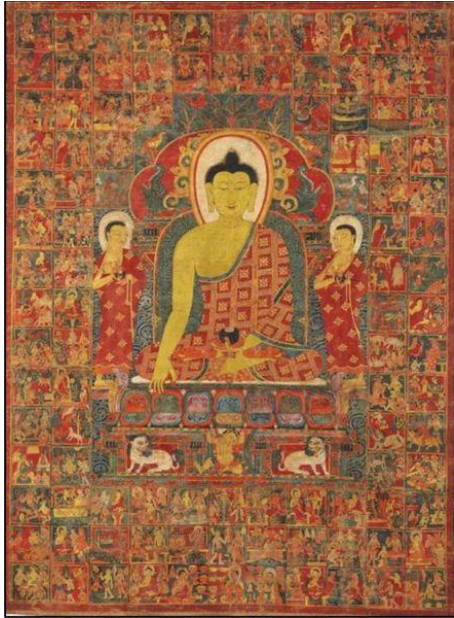


Image 2: 13th century Tibetan thangka of Buddha with 100 Jataka Tales

A strict set of rules about the composition of figures, their proportions, and even the colors to be used have to be followed when a thangka painting is created. So, a thangka artist has to have a deep understanding of Buddhism and its principles, to ensure the appropriate mix of form, line, and color.

The Process of Creating a Thangka

Painting a thangka is a lengthy and painstaking process, and during the entire time, the artist chants prayers learnt from ancestors. Tibetan painters pay great importance to the preparation of the painting surface. First, a piece of cotton cloth is stitched to the four sides of a narrow bamboo frame. This lightly framed cotton is then stretched tightly over a larger wooden frame, and held firmly in place by a stout thread, laced in a crisscross style. The cloth is then treated on both the front and back with a thin layer of primer, made up of glue and zinc oxide. After this, the canvas is polished briskly on both sides with a stone or conch shell to produce a smooth, lustrous surface. Then the canvas is slowly and carefully stretched by tightening the laces, and left to dry

in indirect sunlight. When it has been thoroughly treated and dried, the tightly stretched canvas will make the sound of a drum when tapped.

Next, outlines of the deities are drawn in pencil on the prepared canvas. The composition of figures in a thangka is very geometric. A skilled thangka artist has to spend years studying the iconographic grids and proportions of different deities. For each thangka, the artist will generally select from a variety of pre-designed items to include in the painting. These designs range from alms bowls and animals to the shape, size, and angle of a figure's eyes, nose, and lips. This process requires a deep understanding of the symbolism involved in each image. A thangka is, therefore, not the product of an artist's imagination, but of an artist carefully following an ancient and revered artistic tradition.

When filling in the colours in a thangka, there are rules, and a specific sequence to be followed. In general, a thangka is painted from top to bottom. The sky is painted first. The palette of thangka painters has been classified into seven 'father colours' and one 'mother colour'. The seven father colours are deep blue, green, vermilion, orange, maroon, yellow and indigo. The mother colour is white, which interacts perfectly with all these hues. The lighter shades resulting from the mixture of 'father' and 'mother' are referred to as their sons! The paint used in thangkas does not fade because it is made from powders of crushed mineral and vegetable pigments like silver, agate, pearls, cinnabar, ocher, lapis lazuli, saffron, and rhubarb, mixed with water and adhesive. The paintbrushes used to apply these paints are made from the hairs of goats or weasels. After the colours have been applied the painting is gilded, or embellished with gold leaf.

The most important part of a thangka artist's work comes next – painting, or 'opening the eyes' of the deity. During this elaborate and sacred ritual, usually done at dawn, on an auspicious full moon day, the divine element is believed to enter the image. Before starting work, the artist bathes, prays, and makes offerings to the Buddha's body, speech and mind. The eyes are painted in swift sure strokes. The thangka is then mounted on colorful Chinese brocade or silk, and provided with a cover of gossamer silk. When the thangka hangs on an altar, the cover is gathered up to the top and acts as a curtain. Two narrow sticks are attached to the top and the bottom of the painting so that it can be easily rolled up.

Most Tibetan artists do not sign their works. The creation of every thangka is considered to be divine, and the artist, whose identity is inconsequential, simply serves as a mortal instrument. Also, attaching one's name to a work is considered an egotistical act; since the artist must, like all pious Buddhists, try to destroy the ego.

The last step in creating a thangka is what distinguishes it from all other paintings. The thangka is consecrated. The artist takes his or her newly completed thangka to an enlightened Buddhist master and makes offerings to request the master's blessings. The master is able to 'bring alive' the image on the thangka by infusing it with energy and beseeching the deity to open its eyes and look upon all conscious beings. The consecrated thangka is considered a receptacle of wisdom, a visual scripture that is ready to be venerated as a genuine living embodiment of an enlightened mind.



Image 3: Thangka of Mount Meru and the Buddhist Universe – 19th century

Thangkas can range in size from very small, handheld paintings, to giant festival thangkas twenty feet tall, designed to be unrolled against a wall in a monastery on important religious occasions. Some thangkas are so large that they sometimes cover an entire hillside! At the annual Ganden Thangka Festival that takes place in August at the Ganden Monastery in Tibet, a huge thangka is hung on a wall outside the monastery, and thousands of people come to worship it and pray at its hem.

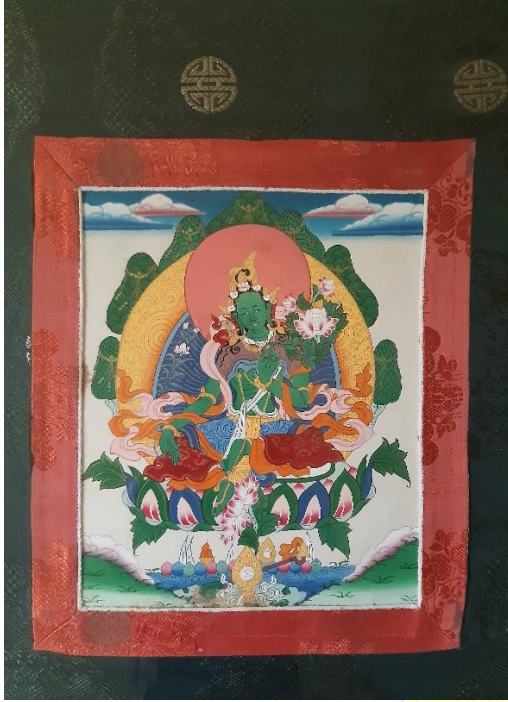


Image 4: Small Thangka of Green Tara

Thangka appliqué is a technique of creating thangkas using not paint, but pieces of silk and brocade. Just like thangka paintings, thangka applique is a sacred art and follows strict rules as laid down in Buddhist scripture. The art of appliqué first began when the Huns of Central Asia started to embroider saddle blankets. Gradually, this art spread east across the Silk Route and was adopted by Tibetans as religious art. Some appliquéed thangkas can be enormous. The largest, which hangs down the face of the Potala Palace, (the original winter palace of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetans) can be over one hundred feet in length. Traditionally, these are only brought out on special religious occasions, and during the rest of the year, are stored away safely.

Buying a thangka painting is expensive, because it takes months, and sometimes even years, to complete. However, a serene, thangka painting is not only aesthetically pleasing to behold but reminds us of the importance and relevance in our world, of the Buddha's teachings of compassion, kindness, and wisdom. When we buy a thangka, we not only support an ancient and valued artistic tradition but get a chance to bring a piece of divine art into our home.



Image 5: Thangka of Green Tara, prayed to for Good Luck and Fortune

Acknowledgements

- Image 1: Thangka of the Wheel of Life' (about 1800) Birmingham Museum of Art
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- Image 2: 13th century Tibetan thangka of Buddha with 100 Jataka Tales
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- Image 3: Thangka of Mount Meru and the Buddhist Universe - 19th century. Bhutan
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- Image 4: Small Thangka of Green Tara - (from writer's personal collection)
- Image 5: Thangka of Green Tara, prayed to for Good Luck and Fortune (from writer's personal collection)

References

None

