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Title: Painting Thangkas: Depicting Morality

Abstract

The paper emphasizes on the Buddhist tradition of thangka paintings (thangka meaning- scroll). Thangka paintings developed in Tibet for over a thousand years and are seen as a continuum of the Buddhist paintings that emerged in India. Thangka paintings are based on the Indian guidelines as well as are also influenced by Nepalese, Chinese and Kashmiri styles. The paper defines the role of the artist in the creation of thangka paintings, while clarifying the purpose behind creating these Buddhist paintings. The role of the artists has mostly been anonymous and not much information is available about them; the paintings are their only impression and beyond that he or she is silent. No names of the artists are written on the paintings. The artist ensures that the purpose of creating these paintings is never lost beginning with the Ajanta cave paintings in India around the 2 B.C., and spanning through over a thousand years to include the Tibetan thangka paintings created in the present day. The artist understands his or her significant responsibility to translate morality visually, elevate mankind, aid in spiritual practices and evoke deities as well as to connect people to the beauty and the divine. All in order to benefit and elevate the humanity!!! In addition, the paper mentions the various steps in the creation of a thangka painting and the various styles in which these paintings can be executed.

Main Text:

"A thangka is a combined effort of the mystic and the artist. The gods and goddesses. The spirits and the demons that populate the thangka reflect the mystical visions of the monk sand theologians, while their visualizations reveal the imaginative powers and artistic skills of the painters." (Pal, 2000, pp. 18).

"If one wishes to honour one's favourite saint or deity, one should recollect his or her good qualities and getting inspiration from these, try to emulate them in one's life. This alone constitutes true veneration" (Khin. 2017, p-129).

"To paint is to evoke" (Tucci.1949, pp-289)

"A thangka is considered more than just a work of art. When created as per the guidelines, it is an object of devotion, an aid to spiritual practice, a medium to evoke deities, channel to visualize Dhamma (Buddha's teachings) and a source of blessings for those who create it, commission, view or meditate upon it." (Master Locho)

The paper consists of following parts:

- Thangka Paintings
- Creation of a thangka painting- Steps
- Styles of thangka painting
- Role of Thangka Artists



"Buddhism is not a religion, it is a system of philosophy coordinated with a code of morality, physical and mental. The goal in view is the extinction of suffering and death" (Khin, 2017, pp.39).

Buddhism is a way of life as shown by *Gautama Buddha*. The Buddhist doctrine consists of the Four Noble Truths; the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The Eightfold Path or *Arya Ashtangika Marga* as shown by *Gautama Buddha* that leads to cessation of suffering, includes practicing *sila* (morality), *samadhi* (mastery over mind) and *panna* (total purification of mind by wisdom and insight). Buddha stated that suffering could be eradicated by eliminating its causes, which are ignorance, craving and aversion.

Buddhist Paintings are visual depictions of Buddhist themes and helps us to choose the path of righteousness. They explain how we are responsible for our own happiness and sufferings. One of the earliest examples of Buddhist paintings are the murals that beautifully decorate the Buddhist rock-cut caves at Ajanta in Maharashtra. These paintings were created between the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. and the early 6th century A.D. Informed by the artwork at Ajanta, painting became a medium through which Buddhist doctrine and the Buddhist artistic tradition traveled along with the

message and purpose of this art form. 'Morality' found itself intricately woven and visually depicted though the medium of painting. Buddhist Scroll Paintings are called *Chitrapata* in India, *Phauba* in Nepal and *Thangka* in Tibet.

Thangka Paintings



Thangka paintings depict Buddhas of past, present and future, Buddhas in their three forms (Nirmankaya, Sambhogkaya and Dhammakaya), the life of Gautama Buddha, Boddhisattvas, Goddesses, wrathful beings, protector deities, guardians, minor deities, astrological and cosmological diagrams, monasteries, nunneries and temples, rulers, geographical provinces, The Dalai Lamas of Tibet (the title used for spiritual and political heads in Tibet), saints and sages, mahasiddhas, yidams, dreams related to lamas and other celestial beings. Dhammapada (sayings of Buddhas), Jataka tales (547 moral based stories related to previous lives of Buddha) and may other discourses also form the central subject of the painting. These themes may be

surrounded by a distinct landscape, usually celestial, that includes sky, sun, moon, snow covered mountains, green mountains, water falls, animals, mythical creatures, ponds and lakes, offerings depending on deities, clouds, flowers, leaves and rocks.

With the movement of artists, pilgrims, and traders, the painting tradition spread from India to all the countries of Asia. Ajanta's influence can be seen in the caves, monasteries, and paintings throughout Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, China and other countries throughout the continent.

In his book *Indian Painting* (1918), Pearce Brown, a renowned British art historian and archeologist, provides for us the journey that Indian paintings made. In Chapter II, "The Buddhist Period (A.D. 50 to A.D. 700)" he talks about art being an important medium to spread the doctrine of Buddhism and explains how the language of art supersedes other mediums. The graphic nature of Buddhism on a historical level lends well to its depiction through artwork, which was used as a means to spread information, such as the tenants of the religion. Priest and missionaries of all sorts traveled from India with these scrolls adorned with images, spreading religion through art from the land of its origin, to Tibet and Nepal, where Buddhism quickly took root. Without a common language, visual imagery provided a universal means of understanding through which multiple nations aspired after the same ideal (Brown, 1918, pp. 24). In Tibet, when these paintings were made on canvas and mounted with silk brocade, they came to be known as *thangka* paintings (alternatively spelled *thangka*, *tangka*, and *tanka*). The word "*thangka*" means "scroll" in classical Tibetan. These paintings could be rolled and carried from one place to another with ease.

Buddhism reached Tibet in the 7th century A.D. where it developed and evolved over the next thousand years. In Tibet, Buddhist paintings evolved through stylistic influences from its many adjacent countries: Kashmir, Nepal, China, and Central Asia (Khotan). From the period between the 8th and 12th centuries A.D., the Tibetan rulers invited the Buddhist teachers and artists from the region of Bihar to Tibet. They carried with them the Buddhist palm leaf manuscripts, paintings, and other artifacts. Artists from Kashmir were also invited to paint the many Buddhist monasteries and temples in Tibet that were built from the 10th century onwards.

It attained classical levels in the Tibetan tradition where it developed a distinct identity of its own, a identity that was very much laid on the Indian guidelines of Buddhist paintings but was also a result of over a 1000 years of evolution and development whereby the paintings and art was influenced by stylistic influences from its many adjacent neighbors—Kashmir, Nepal, China, and Central Asia (Khotan). These influences are reflected in the rich stylistic diversity of Tibetan Buddhist Paintings. The Tibetans became the successors and custodians of this great Indian Buddhist legacy, especially after it started to fade from the land of its origin around 11th century A.D.

From its introduction into Tibetan society as an officially followed religion, by King *Songten Gampo*, Buddhism has been not only a great influence in art, but also in the societal structure of Tibet. In accordance with Buddhist teaching, during the reign of King *Songten Gampo* and King *Trisong Deutsen*, laws were passed which made illegal killing, thievery, and sexual misconduct (the negative acts of the body), lying, divisive speech, gossip, and harsh words (the negative acts of speech), and finally, the negative acts of the mind: covetousness, hatred, and a lack of faith. Through this wholehearted adoption of the Buddhist religion into their society, we can see that *thangka* and similar Buddhist artwork helped to mold the Tibetan culture into that with which we are familiar today. (Lhadrepa and Davis, 2017, pp. 35-36).

In his book, *The Art of Tibet, Pratapaditya* Pal (1969) establishes how the *thangka* paintings are a continuum of the *pata* (alternatively *patachrita*) paintings from India; stating, "There seems no reason to doubt that as an art form the thangka originated in the type of painting known in India as a pata, a work painted on cotton and used for ritualistic purposes as well as provide visual aids for the narration of the edificatory and didactic tales." (Pal, 1969, pp. 35). The relationship between the pata paintings and the *thangka* paintings is clear from their similar material: cotton or sometimes silk in the case of *thangka* paintings; in addition, they are both used for ritualistic purposes. In another book, *Tibetan paintings, Pratapaditya* Pal (2000) states about *thangka* as, "A thangka is a combined effort of the mystic and the artist. The gods and goddesses. The spirits and the demons that populate the thangka reflect the mystical visions of the monk sand theologians, while their visualizations reveal the imaginative powers and artistic skills of the painters." (Pal, 2000, pp. 18).

Discussing the purpose of patas in his book Tibetan Painted Scrolls (1949), Giuseppe Tucci mentions that the paintings could be utilized both for magic and the accumulation of merit (punyasambhara) considering the great worth associated with the spread of the Buddha's teachings as a way to enlightenment. According to Buddhism, a great deal of merit is accumulation by disseminating the Buddha's teaching, helping people come out of ignorance and suffering and circulating sacred objects such as books or paintings. Tucci states that pata paintings were considered "profitable to the spiritual welfare of the donor and of all those who, looking upon them or framing a pious thought, accumulate a good karma." (*Tucci*, 1949, pp. 270). In addition, these paintings were used to evoke the painted deity through meditation, so that the deity would appear to the devotee and "pour out benefits on him." (Tucci, 1949, pp. 270). He continues, stating that thangkas, while religious in nature, are practical pieces of artwork, created for a very specific purpose: to evoke the perfection and attributes of the specific deity. Tucci says that the paintings "are not free creations of the artist's fancy, but on the contrary a necessary element in liturgy, and they are bound... by exact and inviolable rules" (Tucci, 1949, pp. 271). For him, the line remains the most conspicuous feature in Tibetan painting, as "it best expresses a spiritual intent". He also states that only with the purity of the lines, the Tibetan artist could express the abstract philosophy of Buddhism. In Tibetan, the term "to paint" is signified by "lha bris," which means "to write gods," or by the expression "rim" or "bkod pa," meaning "to dispose into lines." (Tucci, 1949, pp. 289).

The *thangka* is not created for purely aesthetic enjoyment. Although some were hung as wall decorations, the *thangka* was primarily an image, an evocation. As the religion is essentially mystical, the *thangka* is intended to aid the devotee in the act of looking within himself. *Thangkas* are created to assist a mediator in learning and emulating the qualities of a particular deity or to help them visualize his or her path towards enlightenment. The deities in the Buddhist pantheon possess certain qualities and it is believed that by looking at these deities, visualizing them, meditating upon them or painting them, we attempt to cultivate these qualities. Once the artist or practitioner is filled with these qualities, it is believed they become one with the deity. A *thangka* can bring blessings on the household that possesses it, while

the painting also serves as a constant reminder of *Buddha's* teachings of compassion, kindness, and wisdom. *Thangkas* of particular deities may be used for protection or to overcome obstacles.

The book, *The Art of Awakening: a User's Guide to Tibetan Buddhist Art and Practice* (Lhadrepa and Davis, 2017) gives a description of *thangka* painting as the following:

"The act of painting supreme images is the accumulation of merit of body, the recitation of mantra is the accumulation of merit of speech, and following teachings such as those outlined here is the accumulation of merit of mind. If followed in this way, practicing supreme art can be a great dharma practice for this life. If we consider it to be precious, it can be precious. It is dharma practice that can lead us to *Buddhahood;* this is very important to appreciate. It is clear that we need both thoughts, and deeds, and tangka painting is an activity that utilizes both, thus purifying our negative karma from the past, present, and future." (Lhadrepa and Davis, 2017, pp. 37).

Referencing thangkas, Robert E. Fisher, in his book Art of Tibet (1997), states that Tibetan paintings are best known in their portable form, the cloth hangings known as thangkas. He further states that, like the wall paintings, thangkas function as a medium between the mortal and divine worlds. "Religious paintings are consecrated, after which they are believed to be occupied the deity they depict, thereby becoming an accurate reflection of the essence of that divinity" (Fisher, 1997, pp 107). Thangka paintings are vertically oriented, and while they range in size, their scale is relative to their use. Paintings hung for personal use would usually be between half a metre, and one-and-a-half metres, while those used for public ceremony could span multiple stories, their size inspiring great reverence in many people.

The *thangka* paintings are mostly created on cotton unlike some of the Chinese paintings that are created on silk. Still the silk brocade used for mounting these paintings are primarily from China or Varanasi in Northern India. Though *thangka* paintings are based on the Indian guidelines, Chinese tradition of painting is seen in their landscapes. This is discussed earlier in the book *The Art of Tibet* (1969),

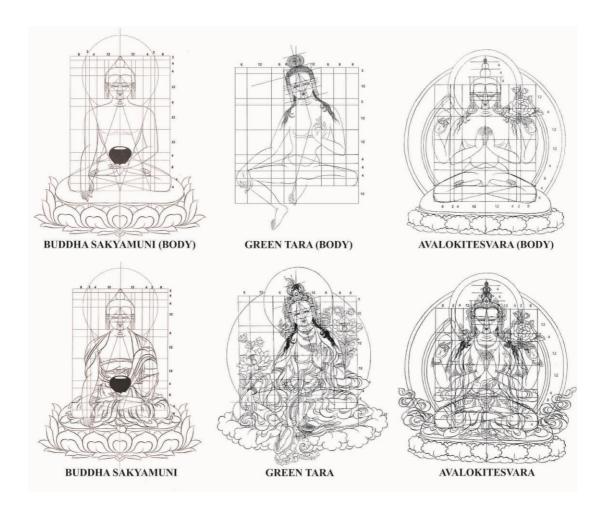
when Pal states, "Although the Chinese tradition of painting exercised a very strong influence on Tibetan painting, the highly codified and academic Chinese theories of art do not seem to have been included in Tibetan literature" (Pal, 1969, 35). The adoption of Chinese landscape painting techniques was primarily due to the greater aesthetic beauty of pacing a figure within a landscape environment, as opposed to a more abstract, figurative environment, as had been done in the *Gupta* period (Pal, 1969, 37). The compositions of these landscape were made inherently Tibetan, reflecting their own understanding of the environment, and furthermore the relationship between nature and their deities.

A *thangka* may take days, months, or years to complete. However, there are *thangkas* that are created for a particular ceremony and are to be finish in just one day. Once created, a *thangka* may last for a very long time, even centuries. This is as a result of the method, material, and techniques that are used in the process of the creation.

From canvas preparation and drawing of the subject, to the mixing and application of colors, decorating with gold or silver, and mounting the finished work in brocade, the creation of a *thangka* painting involves the highest levels of skill and care at each stage and the entire process is indeed transformative. When completed, the meticulous detail and exquisite artisanship of a properly created *thangka* is a feast for the eyes of the beholder, bringing an immediate sense of peacefulness, and thrusting the thoughts of even a casual observer to a higher spiritual plane.

In the Buddhist pantheon there are thousands of deities arranged in several groups Each group has its own set of grids. Some deities are peaceful, others wrathful. Some deities are simple with two arms, feet and hands; while some complex ones may have multiple hands, feet or heads. Each deity has distinct qualities and it is believed that by looking at these deities, visualizing them, meditating upon them or painting them, we try to cultivate these qualities.

As said by Sayagyi U Ba Khin "If one wishes to honour one's favourite saint or deity, one should recollect his or her good qualities and, getting inspiration from these, try to emulate them in one's life. This alone constitutes true veneration". (Khin, p-129)



Hence anyone desiring to pay respects to the Buddha should recall his qualities or attributes of love, kindness and compassion. Inspired by these qualities or attributes, one should try to emulate them. Once the artist or practitioner is filled with these qualities, it is believed they become one with the deity. Each image of the deity represents qualities they possess, purpose of their coming into the world full of suffering, distinct colours, postures, characteristics and so on.

The morality and ethics, the versatility that Buddhism offered and the beauty and divinity the art offered appealed to people far and wide. People embraced and benefitted from these moral based Buddhist teachings and made all efforts to preserve, practice, transmit and promote these teachings because of which even till today we are able to practice and benefit from Buddhist teachings and Buddhist Paintings.

As *Buddhism* spread in Tibet, a larger need for new temples and monasteries emerged. With the establishment of the monastic order and of the four sects that

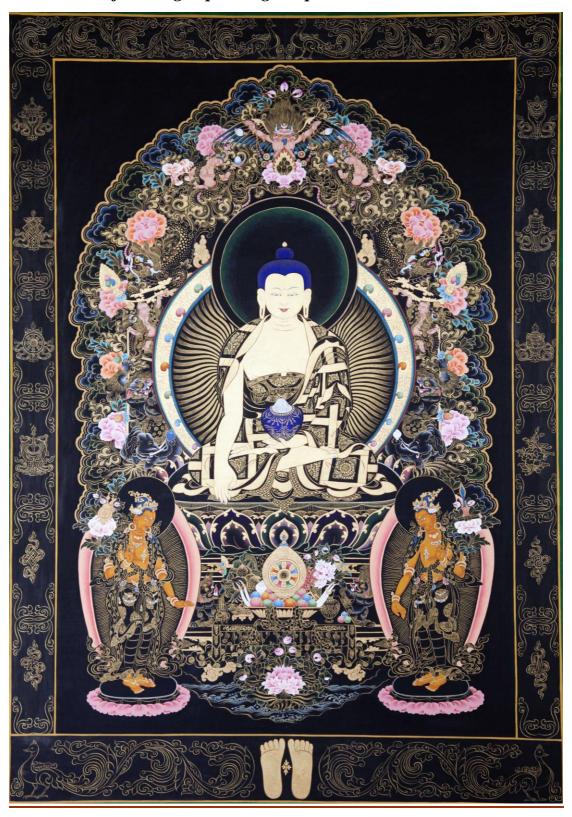
developed in Tibet—namely the *Nyingma*, *Sakya*, *Kagyu* and *Gelug*—themes and styles saw further expansion. To meet this requirement, monastic centers for religious learning were further established in Tibet and in the surrounding Himalayan area.

Buddhism along with the Buddhist Art arrived in Tibet from India. By the 13th century as Buddhist doctrine came to be widely practiced in Tibet, the art also began to assume a national identity for several hundred years, continuing simultaneously to absorb the foreign influences from Nepal, Kashmir, China as well. The rise of the Gelug sect, especially during the fifth dalai Lama brought most of the regional schools under one umbrella and the Tibetan tradition became more nationalistic in style and carried itself with greater vigour till the 20th century. However this beautiful and colorful past faced a treat in the twenty- first century as Tibet was occupied and its political, cultural and reliogious identity came under threat.

After the occupation of Tibet, over 6,000 Buddhist centers were destroyed and much of the art was damaged. In 1959, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama sought asylum in India. Though much of the art suffered and many artefacts got damaged and lost, the masters and the artists became the carriers of the rich cultural heritage in exile, back to its Indian roots. India now once again became the new soil for the preservation of the Tibetan Buddhist art and culture and an epicenter from where the Buddhist art was to spread to rest of the world.

Every Buddhist painting created in India or it Tibet is not just made from pigments, glue, water and other materials but also morality. The morality was an integral part of these paintings and it was the beauty, divinity and the moral values integral to the art work that has truly decorated the paintings for centuries.

Creation of a thangka painting- Steps



The process of creating a *thangka* painting from a piece of cloth to a divine image is highly transformative. The steps to this process are as follows:

1. *Preparation of the canvas:* The first step in creating a *thangka* is to prepare the canvas by stretching it to a wooden frame and covering the canvas with a gesso ground. The gesso is applied in thin coats to both sides of the cloth,

Canvas Preparation:

- Create wooden stretcher frame. Typically, this is 2x3 feet, but make it the desired size
- Cut the cotton cloth to size. Make large enough to leave space for testing colors on the sides and 2 inches for folding the edges, but small enough to have room for stretching within frame.
- Fold back the edges of the canvas about 1-inch and sew creating a 1-inch fold for inserting string or wooden supports. Create fold openings by cutting the cloth at each corner.
- Insert either wooden sticks or string through the folds for support.
- Using the needle wrap the string around the stretcher frame and through the cloth in front of the fold.
- To prepare the gesso canvas base, heat a large bowl of water with some glue. When glue has dissolved, slowly add mixture to distemper, mixing with hand until smooth. Add water or glue until it is slightly thicker than water and somewhat sticky when pressed in the hand.
- Apply gesso lightly to both sides and allow to dry. Apply using a rag in a circular motion and wipe excess in even lines using a scale.
- Stretch canvas by pulling string tight.
- Apply a second coat of gesso to both sides and dry.
- Stretch canvas again.
- Create a watery glue mixture and lay canvas on hard board. Apply watery glue sparingly to a small section of the canvas and polish using either a smooth stone or glass cupp. When one side is polished let dry then polish the other. Then polish both sides a second time.
- The canvas should be smooth but textured to allow paint to stick. Put the canvas in the light to check if gesso was applied evenly.
- Next put the lines of orientation. Preferable use a chalk line, but a large scale can also be used. Create two diagonal lines from opposite corners of the canvas. Place a compass in the center intersection and mark even distances on all lines. Place compass on new marks and make small arcs above and to the side of the center point. After making arcs from all four points, their intersections will reveal the placement of the vertical and horizontal center lines. Make these lines. Using a large compass or scale mark a distance from the center point to the corner to define the size of the painting area. Add horizontal and vertical lines from these marks.

after drying, the base is polished with a stone, leaving a smooth but textured surface.

2. *Lines of Orientation:* Once the canvas is prepared, the initial designing process of the painting begins. The first step in this process is the creation of the eight lines of orientation: the vertical axis, horizontal axis, and four outer borders.

- 3. Transfer of drawing: Drawings that are to be transferred to the canvas are either directly drawn on the canvas or are drawn on the paper first using grids and then transferred onto the canvas. Grids play an important role in the process of drawing and sketching a thangka. Each group of deities has been assigned a particular grid based on physical composition and its characteristics. The significance of the grids, which are the foundations for each drawing, can only be understood while creating these drawings. While transferring the drawing onto the canvas, the main deity is centered on the vertical axis, and the other figures are carefully spaced around it. While deciding the composition of a painting, an artist is bound by various guidelines. There are groups that are arranged according to the hierarchy and this is followed in almost all the paintings. The order followed by an artist is as follows:
 - Gurus/ Higher Lamas
 - Yi-dams
 - Buddhas
 - Boddhisattvas
 - Goddesses
 - Protector deities
 - Minor deities
 - Other beings

This hierarchy is followed while deciding the composition and placement of deities in a particular painting. From these a *thangka* can have a single deity or multiple deities. When it is a single deity *thangka*, the deity is placed in the center. If, for example, no guru is in the *thangka*, the *Yidams* will be considered the highest; if there is no guru and no *yi-dam*, then *Buddhas* will be the highest.

- 4. *Inking:* The sketch is created using charcoal, which is easy to erase. Next, a pencil, which is used with medium pressure, is used in order to keep the canvas clean. After the deity and the background are perfected, they are finalized with ink.
- 5. Application of Colors: Color application is an integral step, as the color determines the style of the *thangka*. There are six basic mineral pigments used to create a full-color *thangka* painting. The blue used for the sky and water

was commonly made from azurite, but sometimes, the costlier pigment, ultramarine (powdered lapis lazuli) was used to color these blue areas. Malachite was used to create green, while cinnabar was used to create both red and vermillion. In order to create a rich yellow pigment, orpiment was ground, and white earth (calcium carbonate or chalk) was used to create white paint. (Jackson & Jackson, 2007, pp. 75-82) Large areas are generally completed first, followed by the application of lighter colors, and then shading with darker colors. When working, the artist applies one color at a time everywhere it is needed throughout the painting. The most important areas, such as the body and face, are completed last.

- 6. Shading: After the application of colors, the artist begins preparations for the next important step, which is shading. The painter uses two brushes to apply two different colors in adjoining areas. The two colors are then blended together while still wet. Dry shading is a secondary step. Pigment is applied on a dry surface, and many thin washes or layers are used to create a deeper color. There are four different styles of dry shading. Spread-on shading (byug mdangs) is the evenly graduated dry-shading method. It is mostly used in shading the skies. Granular shading (bru mdangs) is created with small dabs of indigo, applied thickly and close together. Cloud shading (sprin mdangs) is laid down in small lines both horizontally and vertically to create a sense of dept and separate each cloud layer. The final style of shading, rain shading (char mdangs), which is indigo shading applied via vertical strokes, giving the appearance of falling water. (Jackson & Jackson, 2007, pp. 111-112)
- 7. *Outlining:* Once paint is applied to the canvas, objects are outlined using natural dark pigments. Some of the natural pigments used include pure cinnabar red. Pure cinnabar red is difficult to acquire; however, the results are stunning. Cinnabar is the principle ore from which mercury is produced. Mercury is separated from the sulfur of cinnabar by a controlled process of heating and cooling. Once this step is completed, the crystallized cinnabar is finely crushed and washed with water to remove any impurities. For a master and seasoned apprentice, this process typically takes about two days to complete. Outlining is also used to create details within larger areas. For example, swirling flame designs are common in *thangka* and are created using the outlining technique. After outlining is done, white pigment is applied to

- highlight appropriate areas of the painting, for example, the surface of the water.
- 8. *Pure gold details:* The use and application of metals, such as silver and gold, forms an integral part of a *thangka* painting. Gold is used to create intricate repeating designs in the brocades of the robes as well as in many other objects. Using gold in a painting is considered auspicious and is a symbolic offering to the painted deity or depicted theme.
- 9. *Opening of the eyes:* Once the sketch has been transferred to the canvas and the painting is complete, the master will "open the eyes" of the deity. The eyes are always depicted with highs half closed, symbolizing an inward vision. It is during this final stage of the painting in which the artists give life and soul to the deities.
- 10. Mounting and consecration: Once the deity's eyes are completed the master or artists will write "om, ah, hum" often on the back of the painting, behind the deity's forehead, throat, and heart. This represents the mind, speech, and body of the deity. After this step is completed, the painting is mounted on hand woven silk brocade and a Lama or Buddhist monk consecrates it.

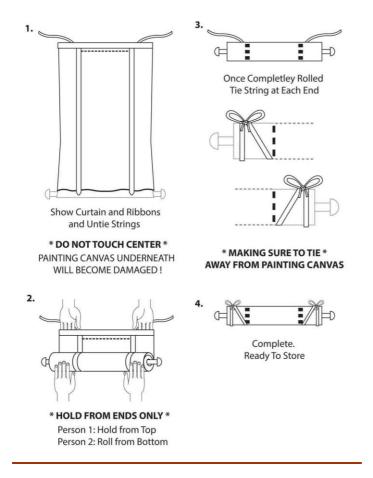
Styles of thangka painting



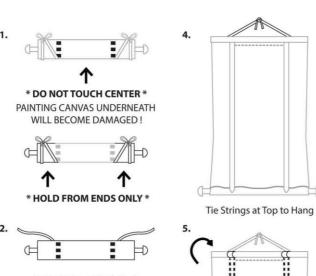
Some styles in which *thangka* paintings are depicted are: "all color style," "black style," "gold style," "red style," "silver style," and "appliqué." However at times, these subjects can be painted in a styles that may be a combination of two or more below mentioned styles or close a particular style. Figure 5 shows how the image of White *Tara* can be depicted in various styles.

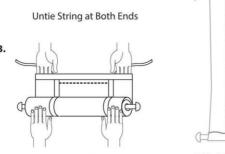
- "All color" (*Tson-thang*) thangkas consist of mineral pigments and pure gold on white canvas.
- "Black" (*Nag-thang*) *thangkas* consist of mineral pigments and pure gold on a black canvas.
- "Gold" (*Ser-thang*) thangkas consist of mineral pigments on pure gold. A 24-carat gold thangka is created on an off-white/canvas, with numerous layers of gold gradually added to the canvas.
- "Red" (*Mar-thang*) thangkas consist of mineral pigments and pure gold on a red canvas. The gold is applied directly on to the red canvas with the help of very fine brushes. These brushes are usually created from horse or rabbit hairs.
- "Silver" *thangkas* consist of mineral pigments on pure silver and is created on a white canvas. A thin silver base is applied on to the canvas, and then silver is applied until a uniform layer appears. This process of preparing silver paint from solid silver metal takes a few weeks.
- The final style is "appliqué" (also called *Go-thang* or "embroidery"); a drawing is made according to strict Buddhist iconographic rules of the desired image, which serves as a model-pattern for the appliqué. At the same time, many fine pieces of brightly colored silk or gold cloth are cut and sewn together to conform to the specific details of the image. Once completed, the image is mounted on a plain white cotton backing and then framed with a pure hand-woven silk brocade border.

How to Unfold and Fold a Thangka
FOLDING INSTRUCTIONS

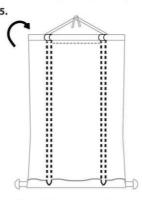


UNFOLDING INSTRUCTIONS

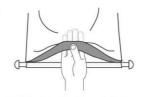




Person 1: Hold from Top Person 2: Unroll from Bottom



Hide Ribbons Behind Thangka



6.

7.

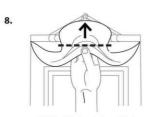
Fold Curtain One Time at Bottom



ntil Arrange so Bottom of Curtain Touches Top of Border



Continue Adding Folds Until Reaching Top of Curtain



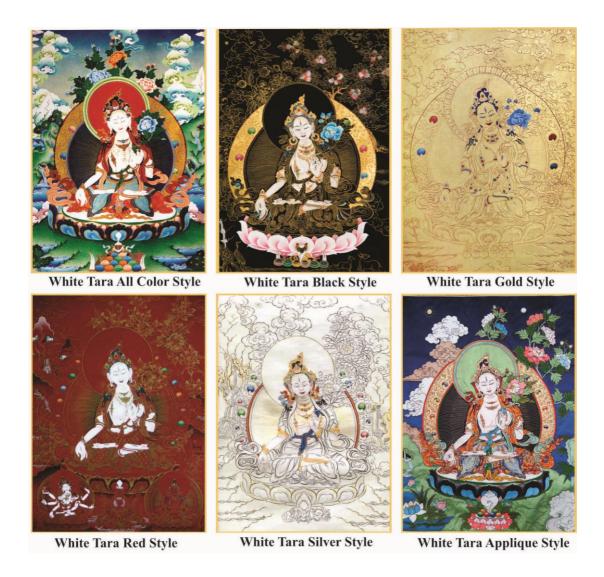
While Maintaining Folds Insert Upward Through Rope

Role of thangka artists

According to Lhadrepa & Davis (2017) "All art achieves one of two purposes: either wisdom or worldly aims." Since Buddhist art imparts wisdom, it is hence considered to be supreme. The accumulation of merit resulting from depicting the Buddha and sacred symbols makes art supreme. For art to be considered supreme, the artist and patron must have devotion to the Three Jewels, should have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, and generate *bodhichitta* (mind of enlightenment). An artist must take refuge in the *Triratna* or 'Three Jewels', which means that the artist honors *Buddha* (enlightened being), *Dhamma* (*Buddha*'s teachings) and *Sangha* (assembly) and is reminded of their qualities. The artist then patiently and diligently works to emulate these qualities of *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, and prepares to translate them visually. The artists, are no ordinary worldly beings and must have, in their previous lives, accumulated a great deal of positive *karma* (*kamma*) and as a result will quickly attain enlightenment in future lives. (Lhadrepa & Davis, 2017, pp. 68).

If, for instance, an artist is to paint the image of Buddha, these qualities of *Buddha, Dhamma* and *Sangha* along with other guidelines such as the thirty-two major marks and eighty minor marks of *Buddha, paramis* (perfections), *boddhicitta* (mind of enlightenment), *mudras* (hand gestures), iconographic guidelines, colors and the skills that the artists acquire with time lays the foundation for creating the image of the *Buddha*. The image of Buddha is then, nothing but '*Dhamma*' personified.

The *thangka* artists act as a medium between the devotee and the deity itself. In this position, the artists are no ordinary earthly human beings; they become the instruments through which these deities find their appearance in this *samsaric* world, in order to benefit mankind.



The following excerpt has been taken from an interview with eminent *thangka* painter, Master Locho, on the role of the artist:

"An artist is a medium through which these paintings are revealed [to] this world. For an artist, creating the paintings in ancient times to the *thangka* paintings done today, the paintings are an act of devotion to the divine for which the artist does not expect any fame or personal honor in return. No names of artists are written below the wall paintings or *thangka* paintings.

An artist is aware of his selfless, anonymous role while he or she creates these paintings. An artist is also aware of his or her role as a creator, giving life and soul to the divine images and bringing them into this world. An artist is also aware of his or her role as a *creator*,

giving life and soul to the divine images and bringing them into this world. For a divine artist, the paintings are an act of devotion to the divine; The artist does not expect any fame or personal honor in return for his or her work. For the artists everything is sacred artists often worship their paints and tools. An artist even meditates upon the images that are to be created. No names of artists are written on the paintings.

An artist is expected to keep his mind pure and free from any negativities. It takes five to ten years to become an accomplished artist and almost [a] lifetime to become a master. Sometimes a student may spend his or her entire life with the master, learning and growing each day until he or she becomes the master. For the artists everything is sacred. Artists often worship their paints and tools and even meditate upon the images that are to be created.

When an artist paints the image of *Avalokiteśvara*—the *bodhisattva* of compassion, he or she begins to develop the qualities of compassion and kindness, this process is certainly a transformative process for the artist. A painting, an artist, and patron are closely related to each other and interdependent. Patrons support the creation of paintings. The patrons could be the rulers, nobles, merchants, riches, organization, or any individual client, or the state. This act of supporting the creation of the painting helps him to accumulate good virtues and become transformed.

The paintings that the artist creates are his only identification. Nothing more can describe an artist better than the artwork. The lines that an artist draw and the strokes of colors is his or her identification ".

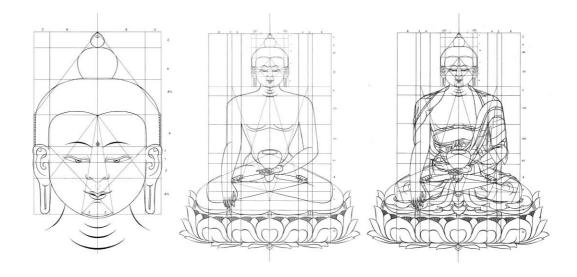
-Master Locho

Though a fair amount of data exists on the subject of *thangka* paintings and its development, history, creation, school, styles, methods and techniques, however because of the anonymous identity of the *thangka* artists and the fact that no names are written on the paintings, we lack information on the hands that created the

paintings. There is limited knowledge on the subject of artists and their relationship to the artwork, the space and how the artists served as an important instrument in translating and depicting morality in a vast array of subjects present in Buddhist doctrine.

At times morality was represented in the artist's choice of color, at other times, through his themes. The concept of morality was readily available for seekers to absorb and through this absorption, evolve into elevated beings full of kindness, love, compassion, and wisdom.

In his book *Tibetan Paintings* (1997), George Reorich describes the necessity of the artist to be of spiritual background and Buddhist temperament, reciting prayers throughout the creative process. "Prescriptions for artist, found in the Kanjur, tell us that he must be a saintly man of good behavior, learned in scriptures, and reserved in his manners." (Reorich, 1997, pp.18). Reorich informs his readers that in order to better understand and appreciate the Tibetan religious paintings, the knowledge of conditions in which the painters work is essential. He says that there are no large schools in Tibet where future artists receive their training, but, like during the Renaissance period in Italy, or in old Russia, each master has apprentices who help him in his work and with time are eventually trained. "Such was the order of things in ancient times, and a similar custom continues to exist in the Tibet of present day." (Reorich, 1997, pp. 16). On the subject of traditional practices of thangka painters, Reorich relates the nomadic nature of Tibetan artists, to the similar styles of artwork across different Tibetan provinces. The Tibetan artist, engaged primarily in reproduction, made himself acquainted with local styles while introducing into these local practices, his own unique style.



These paintings that the artists created had the power to carry men and women to witness celestial worlds by making them exposed to the images of celestial beings and celestial landscapes. These paintings motivate the beings and encourages them to become like the celestial beings or deities or enlightened beings by becoming perfect in the *paramis* or the perfections. *Paramis* are defined as qualities or attributes that one must perfect to reach the final goal of enlightenment with ones practices. The goal is understood as the stage of total purity of mind, in order to serve all beings. These ten *paramis* eventually eradicate all impurities in the mind, help one to dissolve the ego, bring one closer to ones *Dhamma* goal and finally helps in seeking enlightenment. The ten *paramis* are as follows: *Dana-parami*: Virtue in alms-giving (or generosity) ;*Sila-parami*: Morality ;*Nekkhamma-parami*: Renunciation ; *Panna-parami*: Wisdom ; *Viriya-parami*: Perseverance ; *Khanti-parami*: Patience ; *Sacca-parami*: Truthfulness ; *Aditthana-parami*: Determination ; *Metta-parami*: All-embracing love and *Upekkha-parami*: Equanimity.



While an artist is bound by the instructions mentioned in the texts and the scriptures and considers his prime duty to abide by these guidelines, he is aware of honoring what he or she has inherited from the masters and his or her responsibility to transmit the legacy to the next generation once they become a master. Every painting acts as an evocation of its subject deity. Giuseppe Tucci expresses clearly the idea that the artist sees with the 'eyes of the spirit' not with the 'eyes of the flesh.' (Tucci, 1949, pp. 289-290). Based on this idea, the artist must refrain from acts that can result in physical and mental imbalances and impurities. While he practices, he exercises his freedom to translate the concerned elements sometimes as prescribed by his masters or the school he or she follows, simultaneously he or she develops his or her ability to bring about certain changes in style. The master artist's ability to exercise this freedom has led to the formation of schools and styles that emerged in the journey of Buddhist art. At times, distinct regions have produced styles distinct of characteristics of that particular region. Hence schools and styles have established names based either on their founders or from their places of origin.



Conclusion:

The paper enhances our understanding on how thangka paintings are a continuum of the Buddhist paintings that emerged in India. Thangka paintings developed in Tibet for over a thousand years and are based on the Indian guidelines as well as are also influenced by Nepalese, Chinese and Kashmiri styles. By going one step deeper into role of the artist involved in the creation of thangka paintings, we are able to establish his significant contribution that has mostly been silent! Although the role of the artists has mostly been anonymous and their paintings are their only impression; the artist ensures that the purpose of creating these paintings is never lost. The artist is always aware of his role as a medium in translating morality visually, elevating the mankind, aid in spiritual practices and to evoke deities as well as to connect us to the beauty and the divine!!!

Brief Biography

Sarika Singh is a master *Thangka* Artist, teacher and co-founder of Center for Living Buddhist Art. She began her studies in the art of *Thangka* painting at the prestigious Norbulingka Institute in Dharamshala, Northern India. She completed her

Masters degree in Buddhist and Tibetan studies from Punjab University, and is currently pursuing her PhD from Central University Himachal Pradesh. The 'Center for Living Buddhist Art' includes the Museum of Himalayan Arts, Buddhist Art School and a practicing Art Studio. The aim of this one of a kind center is to keep the ancient art of depicting Buddhist themes alive in our contemporary world.

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