

THANKA PAINTING

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Legendary Origins

The painted image of the Buddha is said to have originated in central India, in the area now known as Bihar. It is said that during Buddha's lifetime, two Kings, Utayana and Bimbisara, who lived in the region used to exchange gifts and that one day King Bimbisara, upon receiving a priceless gem from King Utayana decided, after much thought, to have an image of the Buddha painted on cloth to give in return. After receiving the consent of the Buddha, Bimbisara sent some of his court artists to paint the Buddha's portrait. When the artists looked upon the Buddha, however, they were so filled with wonder that they were unable to draw and so the Buddha led one of the artists to a clear pool and told him to paint his likeness from the reflection in the water. This the artist did, surrounding the portrait with images of the twelve links of dependent arising and with some words of religious advice, as recommended by the Buddha. When Utayana saw the gift he was greatly moved and later that day, after prayers and meditation on the symbols of the twelve links, he attained the path of seeing. As a result, this style of painting came to be known as 'The image of the Sage taken from the water' (Chulen-ma).

Another account relates the first paintings of the Buddha to an occasion when he was teaching in Kapilavastu. At that time there was a king called Mahanama, whose wife had a maidservant, named Rohita. Whilst the Buddha was teaching nearby the Queen sent Rohita to deliver a necklace of jewels to him. On the way she was attacked by a girl herding cows and was killed. Due to her faith in the Buddha she was reborn as the daughter of the King of Sri Lanka. When she was a young girl she heard of the teachings of the Buddha and experienced a re-awakening of faith from her former life. She sent a letter to the Buddha with a gift of pearls and in reply, the Buddha sent her a



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letter and an image of himself on which an artist had outlined the rays of light surrounding his body. This style became known as 'The image of the Sage taken from the rays'.



Origins in Tibet

Tibetan thangka painting is based upon the Indian religious art of pata and mandala, complex paintings whose designs were used in certain religious rites. As the Tibetans closely adhered to the religious teachings of the Indian Pandits, so too did they follow the strict guidelines laid down by Indian and later, Nepalese and Chinese artist. Eventually it was the Nepalese and Chinese painters who had the most far-reaching influence on the development of the Tibetan thangka.

The principal artistic schools from which Tibetans painting is derived were in Western India and date back to the 7th and 8th centuries. The influence of these schools was felt throughout Central and Eastern India, eventually reaching Nepal from where it filtered into Tibet.

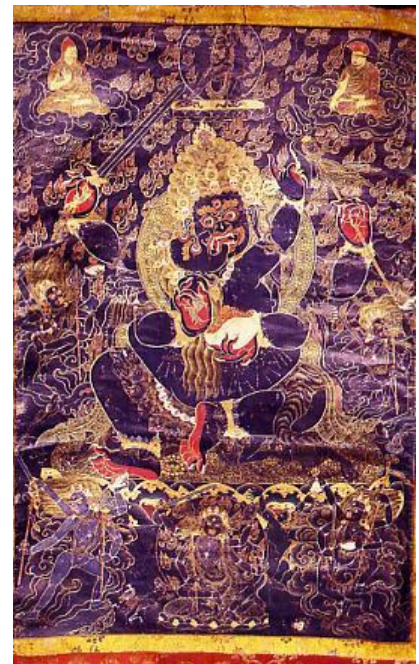
It was in the 7th century, during the reign of Songsten Gampo, that Buddhism and its associated art forms made considerable advances throughout Tibet, Songsten Gampo's marriage to both a Nepalese and a Chinese princess brought Nepalese and Chinese artist into the region where they worked to further the spread of Buddhism through art.

Later, during the 11th century, thangka painting in Western Tibet began to draw from the Kashmiri school when the great monk translator

Rinchen Zangpo, brought a number of artists from Kashmir to Tibet, in the first half of the century. The painting of these artists hung in temples as pictorial representations of the Dharma, furthering the spread of Buddhism amongst the Tibetans of that region. Influenced by Kashmiri art as well as Central Indian art, Western Tibetan painting developed a style of its own, a style, however, which grew stale and which eventually disappeared, during the 17th century.

Over the centuries, the Nepalese influence upon Tibetan painting was pervasive and dominant, remaining uninterrupted for years, whilst the influence of the Indian artists faded with the Moslem invasions of India. Chinese influence, on the other hand, fluctuated according to the changing political relations between Tibet and China and it was not really until the 18th century that Chinese influence began to be felt, revitalizing Tibetan painting which has begun to flounder in its strict adherence to the archaic styles of Nepal and India. As Giuseppe Tucci states in *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 'the development of Tibetan painting consists in a mutual approach and blending of the Chinese and Nepalese manners'.

As time went on, these external influences, which provided the initial direction and rules of Tibetan painting, began to give way to a more distinctly Tibetan style of painting. For later, even when absorbing Chinese influence, the Tibetans learnt to interpret it in their own ways, no longer simply imitating the style as they had formerly done.





Development of Tibetan Styles

The three major styles of Tibetan paintings practiced today are the 'Menri', the 'Mensar' and the 'Karma Gadri' styles. These are the styles of individual artists whose work played an influential role in the development of Tibetan painting.

The 'Menri' style, the oldest of the three forms, dates back to 1440 C.E. and was developed by Menla Dhondrup who studied under the artist, Dhopa Tashi Gyatso, an expert in Nepalese style painting. Through acquiring a thorough knowledge of the new style, Menla Dhondrup went on to revise the proportions and composition of religious figures as well as developing new pigments. In addition he defined the religious requirements of both the artist and patron, demonstrated the need for accurate painting, showing the consequences of inaccurate work and gave instruction in various methods of painting. It was these revisions that came to be known as the 'Menri' style.

In the year 1645 C.E., the incarnate master Chöying Gyatso developed a style of his own, known as the 'Mensar' or the 'new Menri' style. Based on the Menri school, he developed his own approach, making innovations and revisions in the tone, pigment and texture.

Namka Tashi, an incarnate Karmapa artist, born in 1500 C.E. developed the 'Karma Gadri' school, or the 'camp style of the Karma (Kagyü school)'. He first studied painting under Könchok Punday, from whom he learnt the strict proportions developed by the Sharli, a metal casting school of India. He also studied under the 5th Sharmapa, Könchok Yenlak as well as the 4th Gyaltsap Rinpochey, Drakpa Dondrup, who taught him how to paint in a distinctive style which was based upon such examples as: the Chinese thanka given to the 5th Karmapa by the Ming emperor of China; the 'dashelma' masks, made by artists who had witnessed the revelation of Rangjung Dorje's face in the full moon and a Chinese thanka, the 'Yerwa Rawama', that depicts the sixteen Arhats of early Buddhist tradition. Thus, Namka Tashi's style incorporated components from three foreign sources: Indian forms, Chinese colour and texture and traditional Tibetan composition. Of the three styles practiced today, the Karma Gadri is not prevalent as the Menri or Mensar.



As thanka painting is strictly governed by iconographic rules the separate styles are hard to discern. They can be most easily characterized by their treatment of the background to the paintings.

The Mentri style is distinguished by its individual representation of nature. In a painting typical of the Menri school, the clouds flow and curl like rushing water, the mountains are low and rounded and are less packed with detail than the other major styles of painting. The Mensar school on the other hand, employs more detail and is characterized by round and thick or long and thin clouds. The mountains tend to be sharp with steep peaks, which give them an exaggerated appearance. In a Karma Gadri painting, more natural forms are given greater emphasis. They are depicted in a more realistic fashion and are not so exaggerated or dream-like. There is also more open space and the colour green tends to predominate.

Many other artists played an important role in the development of Tibetan thanka painting. With these, however, the styles tended to be absorbed by one of the schools rather than achieving a distinction of their own. One skilled artist of the Gadri style was Karma Sidral or Gamnyon, thought to be an emanation of the 8th Karmapa. He developed a style of his own based upon that of the Gadri school which became known as the 'Second Gadri'. Another artist of inestimable value was the great master Dakpo Rabjum Tenpay Gyeltsen, who was highly skilled in drawing the proportion of the three religious symbols, which led to his proportional style also being adopted by the Gadri school.



A number of unique styles emerged that were also basically proponents of the Karma Gadri school. One of these belonged to the 10th Karmapa, Chöying Dorjey, who was born in the year 1604. During his early career as an artist he studied the elements of the Mentri style under the master Lhodrak Tulku Tsering. Subsequently he developed his own style, incorporating techniques from the Chinese and Gadri styles. Another example is the style of Tsuklak Chökyi Nangwa, which was very similar to the original styles of the 'Three Tashis' of the Karma Gadri school. This tradition became widespread in eastern Tibet, in such regions as Nangchen and Dergey, as well as Karmay Gönchen and Chamdo, where many skilled painters existed who were called 'Karsho'.

At the time that Menla Dhondrup's innovations were first being felt Khyentse Chenmo was born in Gangkar Gangto. He developed an individual style, known as 'Khyenri', which in fact became a tradition distinct from Menri or any other school.

The artist Patshu Byiu of Yarto was an incarnate being and learned person who studied painting extensively. He studied all the techniques of the various schools selecting the best of each and combining them along with his own innovations to form also a style of his own. This became known as 'Byiuris', after his nickname Byiu, meaning bird and is distinguished by the manner of shading and the choice of colours.

The Purpose of a Thangka Painting

A thanka painting is not simply a decoration or a creation of beauty, but a religious object and a medium for expressing Buddhist ideals. These works of art function as models on which the practitioner can reflect and meditate.

There are many reasons for commissioning a thanka, the most common being to create an object of worship which will lead to the accumulation of merit. For even looking at a thanka is in itself a good deed. By meditating on such objects, one can train the mind and gain an understanding of

certain types of awareness that that specific image portrays. Other reasons for commissioning a thanka painting may be to bring about good health, prosperity or long life. Sometimes they are commissioned to aid the recovery of a sick person, or to protect a person through vulnerable periods in his or her life, or to help in the rebirth of someone who has recently died. In all these cases, a lama is usually consulted to advice on which deity should be painted to give the greatest assistance to that person. So if somebody dies, the family of the deceased will consult a lama or an astrologer who will advise them which deity would be the most propitious in assisting a good rebirth.

Thus, there are many different forms a thanka may take depending on what the patron wishes to use the painting for. It may portray peaceful or wrathful deities, meditational deities, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Dharma Protectors or saints and their lives. Green Tara, for example, is a female deity who is seen as the embodiment of all the Buddhas' enlightened activities and may be commissioned to ensure success either in a particular project or in a person's long life generally. Thankas may also depict Buddhist doctrine such as the arrangement of the physical universe as taught in the Abhidharma, the layout of the animate universe in the form of the Wheel of Existence, illustrations of monastic garb, implements and practices, as taught in the Vinaya, as well as medical and astrological charts and diagrams. There is a wealth of subjects to be drawn from and many reasons for commissioning a thanka, so much so that a person may have quite a number painted over a period of time.



The Painter and His Preparations

Whatever form the thanka takes and for whatever reason it is commissioned, it is of the utmost importance that the works are prepared properly and with the greatest care. For if not, they will be of no benefit to the artist nor to the patron, whose devout intentions will be lost on an improper work of art.

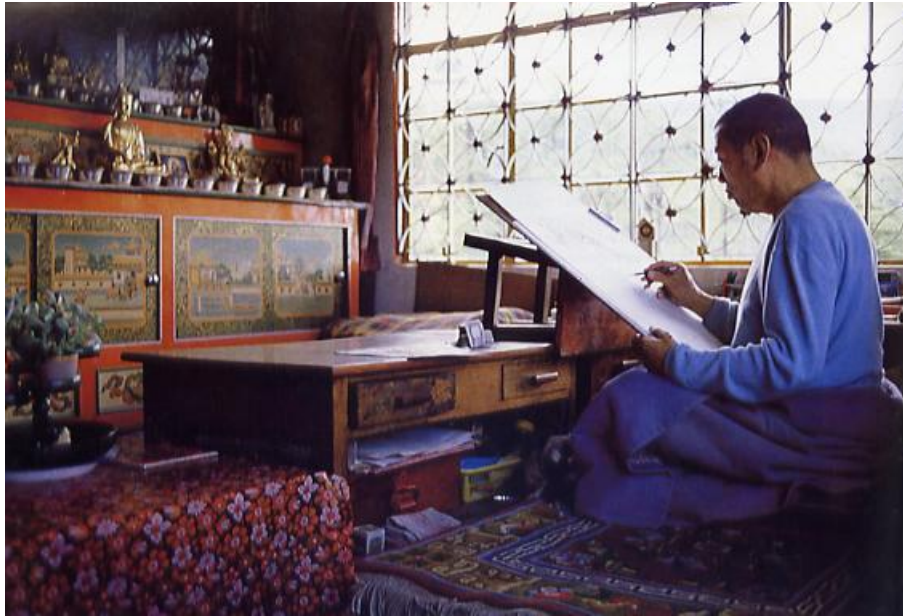
Traditionally it is said that an artist should possess certain characteristics: modesty, devotion to religion, soundness of all senses, diligence and a kindly disposition. In addition, depending on the subject of the work, it is said that the artist may have to follow certain personal restrictions: abstinence from meat, alcohol, onion and garlic and strict personal cleanliness.

How strictly an artist adheres to such 'rule' of conduct varies from artist to artist and on the work that is being carried out. Cleanliness, both in mind and body is of the utmost importance when working on a piece and although it is likely that the artist will abstain from eating meat, onion or garlic, unless real purity is particularly desired, he will not over indulge and often not consume alcohol during that period.

Correct preparation, then, is very important in order to ensure a high standard of cleanliness. Normally, the artist will get up, clean his room and wash himself before laying out the canvas, paints and brushes. The brushes are contained in a special box with

three holes, one for each of the deities: Avalokiteshvara (compassion), Vajrapani (power) and Manjushri (wisdom) who help the artist to achieve perfection in his work. Having prepared his tools





and work area, the artist then makes a water offering, the purest of all offerings and if he is about to start a new thanka will do a short meditation on emptiness to purify his mind.

The meditation may take many forms. One way is for the painter to meditate on a particular deity, which is not necessarily the one that will be featured in the painting. The image of the deity, Manjushri, the deity of wisdom, for example, may be used and is placed in front of the artist, who imagines the image melting into his body before he generates himself as Manjushri.

The next step is to invoke the image of the deity about to be painted. If it is one of the Taras, for example, the artist will visualize the goddess who then dissolves into the canvas, brushes and paints, thus making them the essence of that deity.

The final step is the motivation for creating the thanka, when the artist thinks of all the suffering beings in all the different realms and remembers that he is painting the thanka for the benefit of them all.

As well as playing a role in the purification process, religion also underlies the necessity of cleanliness in thanka painting. For if the artist's mind and body are not clean, he will be unable to invoke the deities. It has been said that in order to paint certain images, the artist must be an initiate of the specific cycle of teachings they belong to. Thus, if the artist wants to paint an image of the Kalachakra, he must have received the initiation first. This need not always be the case. Unless it is a particular thanka, the artist will not have necessarily received the initiations in advance. One monk artist related how, for example, he had once been commissioned to paint a thanka of Vajrakila for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He received a blessing from a lama who showed him how to generate the deity himself, but otherwise it was not his normal practice.

The Preparation of the Canvas

'The painters of Tibet pursue their art in an orderly and systemic way. When creating thanka paintings they proceed through six clearly defined steps. The first is the preparation of the painting surface. Second comes the establishment of a design on that surface by means of a sketch or transfer. The third step involves the initial coats of paint, and that is followed by steps four and five: shading and outlining. The sixth and last step consists of several finishing touches.'

As a thanka painting is made to be rolled up in a scroll fashion, it is painted on cloth whose surface has two layers: the support and ground. The most common cloth, or support, used today is light-weight Indian cotton of fine but slightly open weave. An open weave allows the 'gesso' a kind of

white paint to settle more evenly. This underlying material holds the subsequent layer of ground and paint. Once the artist has acquired the cloth, it is washed, dried and cut to fit the wooden frame upon which it is stretched. This must be done carefully to avoid any bulging which, if it occurs, will be permanent.

Once the fabric is secured onto the frame three steps are taken to prepare the cloth for painting. First is the sizing of the cloth, which involves the preparation of warm solution of hide glue which is applied to both sides of the cloth with a large brush or a wadded rag. Once the cloth is saturated, any excess is removed and the cord that connects the cloth to the stretcher is tightened. Then the canvas is aside to dry.

Secondly, the cotton support is coated with gesso. The gesso used is a solution of either chalk or white clay, whichever is the most available and is combined with size solution until it reaches the consistency of buttermilk. The mixture is then strained through a cloth to remove any lumps and is applied to both sides of the cloth in thin even coats with a wadding rag or gesso knife. When the first coat has dried the artist determines if another is necessary by holding the canvas up to the light. If light comes through, another application of gesso is applied.

Finally the surface is polished until it is perfectly smooth and ready for use.

The Painting of the Thangka

The drawing of a thanka is done in several stages – first are the lines of orientation. The most important line is the central vertical axis, which forms the exact centre of the painting around which the composition will be laid out. The vertical axis usually marks the centre of the main figure – in relation to which all the other figures of the composition are to be positioned. The figures portrayed have to be in perfect relationship to the central axis, any mistakes affect the religious value of the painting.

There are eight major lines of orientation to be drawn. The first of these are the two diagonals. These are drawn from one corner of the canvas to its diagonal opposite and enable the drawing of these two axes. Such lines are drawn with the use of a chalk line or a compass. The second lines to be drawn are the vertical axis and the horizontal line and finally the four outer lines that define the edges of the painting are added.

Once the eight major lines are established the artist can begin his sketching. The first step is to establish the area of the main figure on the vertical axis and its position in relation to the horizontal axis. In order to sketch the figure properly the artist must know the iconographic measurements of each deity as established by Buddhist tradition. The main iconographic classes, in order, are: buddhas, peaceful bodhisattvas, goddesses, tall wrathful figures, short wrathful figures, and humans. Other iconographical systems exist with more classes that are basically subdivisions of the above classes with the addition of some rare types.

Once the main figure is drawn, if other figures are to be included their position is established, according to their status. Next, the artist works on the surrounding area, sketching in the landscape, offerings and so forth. For the drawing of the preliminary sketch, the artist uses a graphite pencil or a charcoal crayon, which allows for corrections to be made. Once the sketching is complete the artist finalizes it by going over the pencil sketch with a brush and black ink Inking in is done with great care, making every effort to





correct and improve upon the pencil sketch, for, with the exception of minor details, it determines the final design of the painting.

The next step is to apply paint to the canvas. This is a two step process which includes filling in the areas of different base colours and shading and outlining these areas. Mineral pigments, mixed with a binder of either size or glue, are used for the initial coats of colour, while dye and lakes are used for the shading and outlining.

The progressive application of paint follows four principles. To begin with, the paint is applied to the more distant planes of the picture – sky and landscape – then progress to the primary figure. One colour is used at a time, being applied to all the appropriate places whilst the paint is still fresh. Due to the shading and tinting techniques used, the lighter colours are applied first and the darker colours for shading and tinting are applied later. Finally, the small features of the painting, those that are important and to be done in light colours, are done last so that they are not smudged during the remainder of the painting process.

A simple example of the paint application process would be a small one-deity thanka with a simple landscape. The main planes are (according to distance) – the sky, the landscape, the deity's nimbus, and the figure of the deity. To paint the sky, the artist prepares by hand a suitable blue paint. He then applies this blue first to the sky and then to wherever it is needed around the figure, beginning with the nimbus and then the body. After blue the next colour used is green, which is applied in a similar manner working from the background forward to the figure. After blues and greens the artist applies the white and bluish and greenish-off whites to distant objects such as the clouds and snowy peaks. For the most part, the remaining colours are used in the forward plane, in this order: reds, oranges, yellow, ochre, brown, pink, white and gold.

The application of the initial coats of paint, depending on the size and complexity of the work, can take from a few hours or days, to a few weeks to complete. Once complete, the artist scrapes the painting surface smooth, in preparation for the finishing steps. After scraping and dusting the artist rubs the surface with a small ball of dry dough. The application of gold cannot be done until after the scraping and cleaning as gold needs a smooth undercoat on which to adhere properly. Nearly every thanka has at least a little gold on it as a religious offering.

After applying the initial coats of colour the next step is the shading. Shading, shadowing and gradation of tones are done to give a three dimensional quality to objects such as clouds. There are two main methods of shading: wet and dry. Wet shading is the blending of two wet colours, which is done during the application of the initial coats of colour. Dry shading is usually a secondary step and is the application of successive thin washes of colour over the dry preliminary coat. The main shading colours are organic dyes and lakes; mainly indigo (blue) and lac dye (red). Other dyes used are mainly

yellow and orange. Typically, indigo is used to shade the initial blues and greens, lac dye is used for the areas of red, maroon, orange, yellow or flesh colour, while yellow is used to intensify and highlight the greens. Shading is done much as the initial coats of colours are applied – working from the farthest planes to the closest and working with as much of one colour at once as possible. Shading is an important feature of thanka painting, taking up a large portion of the artist's time, and is done very carefully and precisely.

Outlining is one of the final steps in the process of thanka painting. It is done to intensify distinct objects, setting them off from their surroundings. It is used to indicate any small or fine details. The colours mainly used in outlining are indigo and lac dye, each used to outlined shaded areas of the same colour. Other colours used are: white, for water and bone ornaments; gold, for nimbuses, seats, flowers, leaves, robes, multicoloured lotuses and rocky crags. These are applied in stronger concentrations than in shading to contrast the base colour and the background more sharply.



The last major step in painting the thanka is drawing the faces of the main figures. This demands great attention. Of the facial features the eyes receive the greatest care, for the eyes bring the painting to life. Of course the shapes and dimensions of the facial features are determined by iconographic traditions. The application of the gold with a burnishing tool is the final step in thanka painting. There are two main types of burnishing, flat burnishing, in which large areas of gold are uniformly polished, and selective burnishing, polishing certain areas or drawing designs onto the gold with the point of the burnisher.

Mounting the Thangka

Most thanka paintings are mounted in a brocade frame. Although there is nothing to stipulate that it has to be brocade or even cloth, it is a tradition that has continued from the past.

Silk brocade is the most popular form of mounting since it is seen as having greater religious merit than other less expensive types of cloth. The quality of brocade used, varies from patron to patron, but again it is generally thought that the higher the quality, the greater the religious value the painting will assume. Likewise, the greater the number of brocades used, the greater the enhancement of the painting. Often, for example, a brocade square is sewn on to the mount below the picture to draw attention to the subject, whilst other paintings are framed with one or two thin strips of brocade, often red and yellow, before being placed on the main brocade, again for emphasis.

The proportions of the mounts tend to be the same, although sizes may vary according to the intended wall space on which the painting is to be hung. Normally, the amount of brocade used at the bottom equals half the size of the thanka, whilst the amount at the top is a quarter of the size of the thanka. Similarly, the mounting at the edge is equal to one eighth of the size of the thanka.

One final addition may be a curtain, which tends to be a piece of orange or yellow cotton material attached to the top of the brocade mount and which, when let down, covers the painting. Two thin red strips of material often hang down in front of this. The purpose of the curtain is mainly twofold, although not all thankas have them. First, it is used as a form of protection, preventing the

accumulation of dust and is raised only on special occasions and secondly it is an extra adornment to enhance the value of the work further.

Since a thanka painting is a religious work, it is usual to place a white scarf at the brocade which is not only an offering but also acts as a protection.



Consecration

Finally, if the painting is to function as a sacred object it is consecrated through a ritual of consecration, which is performed by a lama. During this ceremony, which is a combination of meditation, incantation and the recitation of prescribed mantra, the back of the painting is inscribed with the three syllables, which indicate the body, speech and mind of the main figure, along with names of certain deities and prayers of request or praise. Sometimes the handprints, or fingerprints, of respected teachers are placed on the back of the painting as well.

Characteristics of a Quality Thangka Painting

Most of all the painting must be appealing, beautiful and pleasing to the eye. The image must appear to be well proportioned. There are certain characteristics to look for in determining if the image has been done properly. In a well executed thanka painting the feet and hands are youthful with long tapering fingers and toes, marked with the sign of the wheel (dharmachakra) and the endless knot.

The limbs are graceful unblemished and the anklebones hidden. In the case of a thanka painting depicting a Buddha, his stomach is wide; the navel twisted clockwise, the waist well-defined and the upper body broad with rounded shoulders. The throat is tapered, the lips red and the nose long and pointed. The eye, the most important detail, should resemble lotus petals with the whites and pupils clearly defined. The eyebrows must be distinct and should feature a fine white hair (urna) between them, whilst the head should be large and rounded with broad forehead, distinct hairline and the ears long and lobed. Gema Lama states in his book *The Principals of Tibetan Art* that, 'Generally the form is meant to be large and erect, with dignified bearing and pleasing mien'. He goes on to point out that the masculine and feminine features 'should be clearly defined and the clothing graceful'.

Unfortunately, today, thanka painting and with it, other aspects of Tibetan art are threatened by the influx of fake or badly finished paintings. In many tourist areas such as Delhi, Srinagar or Kathmandu, these pieces are offered to the unsuspecting buyer as authentic thankas. Many have been prematurely 'aged' by holding them over butter lamps for long periods or by twisting them tightly thereby cracking the paint to give the effect of an old, much-used item. The symbols used in some of these paintings have been incorporated with little or no regard to the traditional guidelines laid down over the centuries. Often the grids have been badly or incorrectly drawn and the figures and features from many different mandalas combined into one picture. Furthermore, the silks and paints used are often of inferior quality, which often leads to cracking.



Though authentic thanka paintings belonging to Tibetans may have been sold in the years immediately following their flight from Tibet because of the initial hardship suffered by many families, it is very doubtful that authentic thanka paintings are for sale everywhere now. The sale of religious artifacts is contrary to Buddhist principles and only through the commissioning of an artist as outlined earlier can one acquire a thanka painting. The inferior paintings available at present are of little or no artistic value as most are of crude workmanship and resemble a mosaic of Buddhist symbols, deities, entourage and environments rather than a properly constructed painting. These paintings certainly have no religious value because of the lack of religious intent by the artist and as His Holiness the Dalai Lama has frequently pointed out it benefits neither Tibetans nor Tibetan art and culture for this trade to continue. Thangka paintings are religious works of art intended to aid the devotion and prayers of Buddhist practitioners and herein lies their true value.

Mural Painting

Many of the techniques used in mural painting are similar to those used in thanka painting and often in the past qualified thanka painters were commissioned to decorate the walls and even furniture of public buildings, monasteries and private houses in Tibet.

Whereas the function of a thanka painting is primarily religious and serves as a means of protection, the purpose of a mural painting is more decorative. Its subjects, therefore, tend to be diverse ranging from mythological figures and auspicious symbols to animals, birds, trees and flowers. They are often subjects that may feature in a thanka painting but never as the focal point. Thus in private houses, it would be quite common to have a series of 'medallions', about a metre in diameter, drawn on the walls of a room depicting scenes from various mythological tales known stories such as 'The Four Harmonious Brothers' which in this case would feature the grouse, the hare, the monkey and the elephant. Ordinary people and events were also often drawn, particularly in important buildings, such as the Potala, where a mural would always be painted depicting the building's construction, as well as the ground plans.

Mural paintings are always enhanced with a border painted immediately below the ceiling. Ornatly decorated with a pattern of flowers, the boarder is made to look like a curtain, where even the folds of the material as well as the tassles are carefully drawn in. This is usually balanced by three stripes, again florally decorated, which line the walls at the base of the windows running parallel to the border at the top.

In addition to those of non-religious subjects, many religious murals also exist. The decorations in temples are always religious and feature many deities, all of whom have a certain position within the building according to their status and function. Pictures of the more exalted figures, such as the Lord Buddha are always painted behind the main altar and face the protective deities who line the back wall of the temple. In front of the main door are placed the Four Guardian Kings, whose bodies are painted white, blue, red and yellow as they protect the East, South, West and North respectively and who stand next to a painting of the wheel of cyclic existence.

When a religious mural is painted, the artist follows the same traditional guidelines carried out in thanka painting. Thus the same careful preparation and rituals are done before the work is begun and





he uses the same system of grids and proportions as those used in a thanka painting. Likewise, the painting is consecrated upon completion.

The same bright colours that are used in thanka painting are used in mural work, although the type of paint is different as well as the method of application because of the contrasting surfaces. Unlike thanka painting, where the colours are added one on top of each other to achieve a fine degree of shading, when painting a mural, the colours are applied at the same time and mixed on the wall itself to achieve the desired shade, thus using the wall as a kind of palette. So, when painting a pink flower, both the white and red paint are applied together and mixed until the correct pink is obtained.

Mural painting has always featured heavily in Tibetan architecture, much of which was unfortunately destroyed by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution. Brightly painted furniture, for example, which was found in most Tibetan households, had to be painted over, or in the case of poorer people who could not afford the paint, darkened with mud or charcoal and it was a long time before it could be removed. It is only recently that mural painting has begun to be revived properly both in Tibet and in exile, where, as the need to ensure that Tibetan culture does not die, every effort is being made to revive and continue the traditions carried out in the past.



Painting Guilds

Most thanka painters in Tibet belonged to a painting guild. For not only was it considered prestigious, since entry was difficult, but it automatically guaranteed a steady income of work at a high level.

As with other building guilds, the artistic guilds carried out a variety of work, both public and private, which ranged from the creation of thanka paintings, private mural work and the painting of furniture to the restoration and decoration of larger edifices, such as monasteries, temples and public buildings.

Hierarchy played a considerable role, not only amongst the artistic guilds but amongst the other building guilds as well. Since much of the painters' work was of a religious nature, the artistic guilds assumed a superior status to those of the carpenters' or masons' guilds. It was for this reason that they were also exempt from having an organized administration, which gave them greater individual freedom in the type of work they undertook. Levels of superiority also featured amongst the artistic guilds themselves. The ones with the greatest prestige were the five or six who had official recognition and who consequently carried out all government work. This, however, did not prevent the other guilds from carrying out any type of work. Then, within the guilds themselves, five or six ranks of seniority existed.

The guilds mostly collapsed or became inactive following the Chinese occupation, especially during the Cultural Revolution when art and culture was repressed.

In the late 1970s, when restoration work began and artists were allowed to paint openly again, instead of reestablishing the guilds, government-run cooperatives were set up, to which all artists had to belong if they wanted to work. Even today, when much greater freedom reigns, the guilds are yet to reappear.

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