

# A Living Tradition of Buddhist Painting – The Thangka Painting

## Abstract

Among various creative forms of Buddhist art, a sacred style of Buddhist painting was developed in Tibet, known as Thangka Painting. Thangka painting is the representation of Buddha philosophy on the flat surface. They are generally scroll paintings hanged in monasteries or rolled up for religious purpose. These paintings usually represent the scenes from the life of Lord Buddha, and of his pre-incarnation in the Jataka etc. other than this they depict the social and historical phenomenon, customs and habits of Tibet. Thangka paintings are important for Tibetans because these are considered as an important material for studying the religion, history, culture, painting, arts and craft and scientific achievements of Tibet.

**Keywords:** Living Tradition, Buddhist Painting, Thangka Painting, Tibet, Buddha Philosophy, Scrolls, Monasteries, Religious Purpose

## Introduction

The religious use of art originates from its attempt to give imaginative expression to its infinite seeking for experiential values latent in human self consciousness. Art represents the imaginative level of the artist for eternal or religious quest. Turning to Asian countries, it was discovered that the art is closely connected with religion since the beginning. One may exemplify such perfect union of art and religion in the paintings of Ajanta and Bagh in India, Buddhist painting of Nepal, Tibet and China etc.

Buddhism became a great source of inspiration for the development of the religious art forms in Asian countries, known as Buddhist Art. Though Buddhism was founded in the sixth century B.C., the earliest record can be traced only to the reign of Emperor Ashoka (273-232 B.C.). Buddhism was originated in India, but its teaching crossed the boundaries of India and reached most of the countries of Asia. Monks carried the Buddha's vision in its Hinayana, Mahayan and Vajrayana forms. In this manner, along with religion, Buddhist painting spread in many countries of Asia. Their artistic creations were based on Lamaist forms. Artists from diverse cultural backgrounds created new styles, giving a rich and subtle palette of expression to Buddhist art.

Buddhist art was developed in various creative forms in Asian countries. Among them, in Tibet, a sacred style of Buddhist painting was developed, known as Thangka Painting. Buddhist painting in Asia is not merely a form of art, whereas it represents a transcendental world. These Buddhist paintings treasures are preserved in monasteries; museums and the private collections. Later on, the Buddhist art forms became the aid to meditation and to represent their faith in spirituality.

The tradition of Buddhist art was introduced into Tibet from the eastern part of India. Tibetans were influenced by the Mahayana and Vajrayana forms of Buddhism. So, the Buddhist paintings were also based upon them. Buddhist painting represents the life and preaching of lord Gautam Buddha and additionally the core strategies and philosophy underlying the Buddhist faith. It provides a path of profound ethical values and iconography. In this age of mental conflict, Buddhist painting acts as tool that has potential to help the individual to discover his soul. These paintings lead us to walk in the path of religious enlightenment.

## Objectives of study

The Thangha Paintings are unique in their execution and have a distinctive style. To establish this fact, following are the objectives of study:-

1. To study the historical background of Tibetan art and Thangka Paintings
2. To study the importance and uniqueness of the Thangka Paintings as living tradition of Buddhist art
3. To study the process and technical aspect of Thangka Paintings



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4. To render an artistic appreciation of the paintings
5. To heighten public awareness of this precious cultural expression of Tibetan people

## Review of Literature

To get an overview of research studies done in the area of Thangka paintings an extensive review of literature was carried out. There have been very limited studies regarding this subject. Roerich (1925), Sankrityayana (1937), Godwin and Austen (1964), Mehra (1970), Hudson (1972), Agarwal (1975), Karmay (1975), Gray (1977), Macmillan (1977), Gerasimova (1978), Peterson (1980), Jackson and Jackson (1984), Pal (1984 and 2001), Chakraverty (1999), Bala and Bill (2003), Kumar (2007) discussed various aspects of Buddhist Tibetan arts and their forms, very little was known about the artistic appreciation of the Thangka paintings. In the year 2016, Gautam M. completed an analytical research work on artistic appreciation of Thangka paintings. Shaftel A. (2017) in a study 'Thangka Treatments: Forty Years Hindsight' gives us a precious insight in the conservation of Thangka paintings. Slocumb H. (2018) in an Independent Study Project (ISP) 'Thangka painting : An Exploration of Tibetan Buddhism Through Art' gave a complete historical and developmental account of this precious art.

## Hypothesis

Buddhist painting in Asia is neither merely a form of art nor is it meant for the connoisseur. It represents a transcendental world. It is a combination of spirituality and of ideal beauty by painters who had scriptures in their minds and faith in Buddhism, its philosophy and morality which is a source of inspiration for moral and social, political and religious values. The flourishing art of Buddhist painting spread in many countries of Asia. Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand in the southeast accepted Buddhism in its Hinayana form; in central Asia, China, and Japan and Tibet it flourished in its Mahayan form.

In Tibet deities were either 'skus', 'sacred bodily form', that is, a three dimensional image, or a thangka, 'painting on a flat surface', a two-dimensional representation on a scroll or on a wall. Thangkas are generally scroll paintings hanged in monasteries or rolled up for religious purpose. These paintings usually represent the scenes from the life of Lord Buddha, and of his pre-incarnation in the Jataka etc. It is the art of internalization.

Although always religious in nature, Tibetan thangka covers a wide range of subject matter. Along with Buddhist philosophy, they depict the social and historical phenomenon, customs and habits of Tibet. These paintings have expressive color schemes i.e. multi colors are used on dark background. These are usually painted on cotton and silk. Thangka paintings are important for Tibetans, because these are considered as an important material for studying the religion, history, culture, painting, arts and craft, and scientific achievements of Tibet.

Thangka painting has religious and cultural importance. It is deeply connected to the Buddhist religion and presents the unseen phase of Buddhist religion in front of us. It has distinctive features like well form composition, attractive color combination

and high presence of religious as well as spiritual values. Thangka paintings were originated between 7<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> century in India. The ancient art of thangka paintings is practiced in Buddhist dominated areas of India. Dharamshala, which has a sizable settlement of Tibetans, can be called the hot bed of thangka painting. And in Tibet, it was introduced during 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 10<sup>th</sup>- 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, the art of western Tibet drew inspiration from the Kashmir valley, while central Tibet reflected the aesthetics of eastern India and the Pala School. The Pala-inspired central Asian style was another source for central Tibetan art.

Painting along with sculpture was crucial to the religious life of Tibet because it was a medium through which the highest ideals of Buddhism were evoked and brought alive. A sacred painting was for Tibetan a "physical support" i.e. an aid or embodiment of enlightenment. Tibetan artists have main three reasons for making the paintings are these; 1. Sickness or troubles, 2 Death in the family and 3 The need for an image in connection with a particular practice.

Tibetans were often advised by religious preceptors to commission a painting for the "removal" of physical or mental "obstacles", or to create the prerequisites for "a long and healthy life". Tara, for instance, was effective in removing obstacles and granting protection, while Amitayus bestowed long life. Many paintings were thus inspired by the universal human desire to avoid suffering, to gain happiness and longevity, and to ensure a happy state of existence following death. For the true Mahayan Buddhist the ultimate goal of every meritorious thought and action should be the attainment of Buddhahood, for the good of all living beings i.e. the wish to attain the enlightenment.

The sacred paintings were used to help individual in connecting with his own religious practice. Thangkas could be important aids for Buddhist practices and observances, and Tibetans therefore commissioned them according to their particular needs. An icon of Buddha acted as a focus and support for the practicing Buddhist's faith and it was also a reminder of Buddhist's commitment to travel the path set by the Buddha. Occasionally a simple Buddha image was used as the object of focus during concentration meditation, but more commonly it functioned as a worthy object for worship and offerings, one which provided the Buddhist with the right circumstances for adding to the accumulation of merit required for spiritual advancement.

Thangkas were sometimes used to bolster the visualizations generated during meditation. For example, the 15<sup>th</sup> century religious master Gong-dkar-ba- Kun-dga'-nam-rgyal had a vision of Mahakala during his meditations late at night. That same night he made a sketch of the deity.

Thangka paintings possess high religious, spiritual, aesthetical and moral values. These are only commissioned for religious practices. To fulfill the religious purpose, the name of the artist and the time period is also not mentioned over them. These were

not being collected in personal collection, as they are preserved in monasteries or any religious place. Thus it will be significant for people to analyze the importance of Thangka miniature painting and the hidden concept or idea of precious cultural expression of the Tibetan people or religious philosophy.

## Research Design

**Figure 1**  
**Medicine Buddha Thangka 25" x 20",**  
**Cotton, Thangka paintings.com**



In spite of being highly developed means of religious expression, one cannot overlook the fact that thangkas are 'not always inspired by a joyful or pious urge to produce and object for worship'. Ordinary people commission a thangka quite often under circumstances sad or unavoidable, which they want to overcome with the propitiation of certain deities.

Generally Tibetan priests often advise those confronted with physical or mental obstacles to commission a thangka and perform rites to abate these obstacles or nullify them totally. For example a thangka with the depiction of Tara always bestows protection and removes obstacles of all sorts, those representing Amitayus assure longevity, those with the representation of the Medicine Buddha (figure 1) has the power of healing and the ones painted with any of Vaishravana enhances well being and wealth.

**Figure 2**  
**Five Dhyani Buddhas, Cotton**



The dominating themes of thangkas are of religious significance. The portrayal of Buddha Sakyamuni and his twelve deeds form a major group. Dhyani Buddhas (figure 2), their mystical consort and corresponding Bodhisattvas may be placed in another group and together with the exhaustive representation of Vajrayana pantheon form the most important category.

Next come the subjects of hagiographical interest which includes the portraits of scholar-saints and depictions of events from the mythological biographies. Mandalas or spheres of divine residence of various deities belong to separate category. There are also themes like the depiction of the founding of monasteries, paintings of the wheel of samsara or existence and paintings to ward off evil from all directions. Reinterpretation of historical themes through painting is an outstanding feature of thangkas. These include historical themes and scenes from the stories of epics and their heroes. Depictions of other subjects include the eight good luck symbols of Tibet, seven precious articles of royalty, the seven precious jewels and many more such symbols from Tibetan mythology

Thangkas are painted in a technique close to tempera ( a process of painting using pigments mixed with size, casein or egg instead of oil) on sized cotton canvas with water-soluble pigments, both mineral and organic, tempered with a herb and glue solution. The entire process demands great mastery over the drawing, perfect understanding of iconometric principles and patience. It follows the following steps-

1. Preparation of the painting surface
2. Transfer of the drawing on to the support
3. Application of paint
4. Shading and color gradations
5. Outlining
6. Finishing details

Every work of art is analyzed and criticized on the basis of art elements. Elements of art are considered as the foundation of any kind of painting. Mainly considering visual art, these elements like line, form, colours, tones, textures and space play vital role for the formation of paintings as well as for their analysis. In this manner, Thangka paintings can also be analyzed on the basis of art elements using observation and descriptive research method. In following steps.

## Line Arrangement

Thangkas are mainly characterized by their fluidity in lines. There is rhythm in each and every form of the painting. The lines are soft and have a certain flow.

## Form Composition

Most of these thangka paintings have complex composition of minor figures and main figure in centre that signify different aspects of the dominant philosophy i.e. Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism there is description of around 100 deities which have been depicted in thangka paintings also. In starting figures are composed through the use of egg shaped ovals. Then individual forms were composed following a fixed measures e.g. Buddha in 125 sor mo (measurement unit in Tibet) or 10 thal of 12.5 each.



### Colours Composition

In Tibetan Buddhist art colours are more than their visual appearance. Through colour symbolism the devotee gives expression to his psychic experience. The basic five colours namely, white, yellow, red, black, and green have different symbolic meanings. According to Chanda Maharoshana Tantra, a text of Vajrayana rituals, black stands for killing and anger, white denotes rest and repose, yellow symbolizes restrain and nourishment, red is indicative of subjugation while green stands for exorcising practices

Some of the beautiful Thangka paintings representing distinctive characteristics are analyzed as follows:-

**Figure 3**

**Avalokiteshvara Buddha Thangka, 33"x23", Cotton, Thangkapainting.com**



Avalokiteshvara Buddha Thangka is the embodiment of the compassion of all beings – both the enlightened and those striving for enlightenment. Compassion is fundamental to developing bodhisattva, or the awakening mind, which is the foundation of the Mahayana vehicle.

Figure 3 Two forms of Avalokiteshvara are most popularly portrayed in the Tibetan tradition – a thousand- armed, and a four-armed. He is depicted here in his more peaceful, white-hued, four-armed form, seated upon a great lotus flower. The white rosary in his right hand represents his aspiration to liberate all beings from ignorance and rebirth, while the lotus in his left signifies his transition from a mind contaminated by ignorance to one of perfect buddhahood. His two folded hands represent his power to gather the requisite conditions through which his compassionate intentions will be fulfilled.

Figure 4 Maitreya is a bodhisattva currently residing in the Tushita Heaven, but in the far distant future when the teachings of this present Buddha become lost and forgotten, Maitreya will manifest as a Buddha on earth to propagate the perfect path to

enlightenment once more. Maitreya's posture is the posture of a teacher, and reflects his readiness to descend from Tushita into the mortal world. His hands are in the gesture of turning the wheel of Dharma. The wheel to his right represents the teachings he will reveal when appearing in this world as a buddha, and the vase to his left indicates he will be born into the brahmin caste.

**Figure 4**

**Maitreya Buddha Thangka, 23"x16", Cotton**



**Figure 5. Green Tara thangka, 29"x21", Cotton**



Figure 5- Green Tara is said to embody the fulfillment of all beings' desires, both worldly and spiritual. As one who grants beings' wishes, she personifies good fortune, although unlike the worldly wealth-bestowing deities, the wishes she fulfills include liberation from ignorance.

She was once a princess named Jnana Chandra in a human realm. In her youth, she took a vow to achieve complete enlightenment in a female form and entered into deep concentration, focusing her mind on the dependent nature of reality and the task of benefiting other beings. She then made an oath to dedicate her entire future existence to the welfare of all beings. Her green hue indicates that she grants wishes. The gesture of her right hand shows that she will guide those who aspire for Buddhahood to their goal, while the gesture of her left hand indicates that she is free from all ignorance, being therefore endowed with the authority and ability to carry out her intention to fulfill the needs of beings. Her white necklace represents the joy that arises when the obscurations of ignorance are overcome, while the utpala flower she holds in her left hand represents the effort that is required to overcome these obstructions. Her outstretched right leg suggests her readiness to help any being in suffering.

**Figure 6**

**White Tara Thangka, 29" x 21", Cotton, thangka paintings.com**

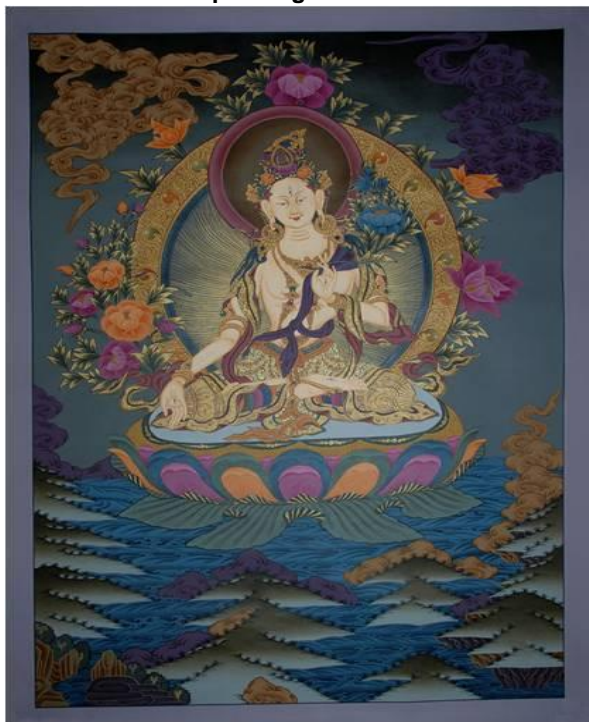


Figure 6- White Tara represents the enlightened and liberating activity of all the Buddhas. She embodies the motherly aspect of universal compassion. Her compassion for living beings and her desire to save them from suffering is said to be even stronger than a mother's love for her children. White Tara, the Mother of all Buddhas, is known for her swiftness in responding to the prayers of those who

invoke her name. Her right hand is open towards us in the gesture of supreme generosity, signifying her ability to fulfill our spiritual and material needs. Her left hand is in the gesture (mudra) of bestowing blessing, refuge, and protection. White Tara meditation practice is said to grant health, long life, fearlessness, patience, and peace.

#### **Findings**

Thangka paintings have been considered the important aid to understand Buddhist philosophy, to attain enlightenment, to meditate and to forward knowledge to next generation without adding anything. The traditional art of Tibet is lived today because of the art graft attitude of Tibetan artists who without including their creativity adopted the art in its pure form, transformed it and developed it sustainably till today. The artist is only allowed to add his creativity in the background that is filled with landscape view.

The use of gold pigments makes these sacred paintings very much precious. As to fulfill religious motifs these paintings are donated in monasteries and family altar, but these paintings have become much popular among people and are liked by all over the world. This is being demanded because the many people have started following Buddhism. So, the paintings are used for commercialization. These are being sold in online galleries at high cost because of the use of high amount of gold.

As thangka paintings depict the complex culture, history, social and religious phenomenon of Tibet and Tibetans, so these paintings acts as a gateway to understand the Buddhist philosophy and complete Tibet. The philosophy of thangka painting also cannot be understood without knowing the Tibetan culture and religious background. Today, many researches are being done to understand this beautiful and distinctive style of art. This has mainly attracted the western art critics who called the Tibetan culture "ground fossils".

#### **Conclusion**

Today, thangka paintings represent the living culture of Tibet and Tibetan art. Although being originated in India, it is much lively practiced in Tibet today. In Tibet, the painting of thangkas is considered as an important and highly developed means of expression through which entire Buddhist philosophy can be explained. Religion and culture of Tibet have been influencing characters for making thangka paintings important and popular among Tibetan peoples. This style has established its unique identity with its distinctive features of well form composition, attractive colour composition and high spiritual and religious values' depiction. Thus these traditional paintings have been an inspirational source for many artists to practice Buddhism for a long time and also will be influencing factor to transform the high religious and cultural values to the future generation in same way. Thangka paintings have represented the Baudh philosophy in new dimensions, which will be always considered very sacred and honorable treasures in the history of Asian Buddhist art.

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