

THE SACRED SCROLL PAINTINGS OF THE TIBETANS: THANGKA PAINTING

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Abstract : Thangka, the painted pictorial scrolls in cotton fabric or silk, carry a strong religious character. They are crucial to the religious life of the Tibetans which acts as a medium to evoke the high ideals of Buddhism. This traditional art of the Tibetans being inspired by religion mostly depicts the life and teaching of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, spiritual symbol in Buddhism or Jataka tales. 'All the components of a Thangka (silk border and central painted component) have iconographical significance' (Huntington 1970). It is the support of Dharma practice and the tool of Dharma propagation. It represents and preserves the essence of the Dharma. Thangkas are undoubtedly a support of spiritual realization and it is used as didactic aid to illustrate their teaching and as an aid to meditative visualization. Thangka is consecrated after its completion by a Lama and often a mantra is written on the reverse. This consecration ceremony is of utmost importance as it elevates the status of a Thangka from a piece of art to sacred spiritual one, thereby giving its liturgical value. If the Thangka is painted in a genuine way following prescribed canonical authority and artistic tradition then it is very different from an ordinary work of modern art and is inherently highly sacred. An attempt is made in this paper to present the spiritual significance of the Thangka and as a support of religious expression.

Key words : Thangka, Scroll painting, Buddhist, iconography, Jataka, Spiritual, Realization, Expression

“The highest art is always the most religious and the greatest artist is always a devout person.” If one follows this statement by Abraham Lincoln it becomes easier to understand the scroll paintings of the Tibetans as the history of the Tibetan painting is inextricably woven with the history of religious developments. There are astonishing fine artistic works in Tibet but it is on the whole only the sacred paintings, the Thangkas, which have caught the major attention of the world not merely because of their spiritual significance but also for their aesthetic value.¹ Thangkas are highly admired and generally considered as artworks in the commercial market but the Tibetans and the Buddhists revere this artwork for its religious values than its aesthetic sense. Thangkas with its magnificent colour combination and intriguing subject matter may seem fascinating to some or it may appear chaotic and inexhaustible with varied array of iconography. In order to understand and interpret a Thangka as a sacred object or an artwork it is essential to have a sound

knowledge on Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism since its iconography is Buddhist centric, orderly and above all hierarchic. Thangkas have been a crucial component of Tibetan culture and religious life since remote past. Hence the etymology of the term Thangka, after Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, comes from the Tibetan word *Thang-yig* which means 'annal' or 'written record'. The literal translation of the Tibetan word Thangka means recorded message. Another meaning of the word Thangka is 'something that can be rolled up'. Thangkas are mainly sacred religious scroll paintings painted in opaque water colour on cotton fabric or silk illuminating a deity or events usually of a religious nature. The most common shape of the Thangka is an upright rectangle, mounted in elaborate silk brocades. The painting is generally covered with gossamer thin red or yellow silk veils to protect the painted surface from dust and in early days from smoke.

If one has to look into the origin or source of the Thangka painting, it is based upon the Indian religious art of *pata*, illustrative paintings of the deities and *mandala*, the mystic geometric or pictorial diagrams of complex prescribed patterns of circles and squares each having specific significance. This art form filtered to Nepal in the form of Newari Paubha and eventually to Tibet. In Nepal these Paubhas remained practically the same as those in India. Even in Tibet the Indian tradition of producing sacred pictures having a single deity remained the same with certain transformation in artwork. It was in the 7th century when Tibetan art forms made considerable advances. One reason for this progress was the marriage of Songsten Gampo to Nepalese and Chinese princess; the cultural heritage of their respective countries had a far reaching influence on the development of the Tibetan art. Another reason was the spread of Buddhism which assimilated with the old Bonpo religion of the land which injected a new vigour into the cultural life of the Tibetans. For several centuries the Nepalese influence upon Tibetan painting was dominant and remained uninterrupted for a long time. Chinese influence, on the other hand, fluctuated along with its changing political relations but one cannot deny its contribution in the development of Tibetan art. In fact, the development of Tibetan painting consists in a mutual approach and blending of the Chinese and Nepalese manners.² The interaction of Tibet with its neighbouring countries also had profound influence on the culture and artistry of Tibet. These external influences which provided guidelines and rules at the initial stage to the Tibetan painting slowly began to give way to a more distinctly Tibetan style of painting. Instead of simply imitating and absorbing the style of neighbouring countries the Tibetans started interpreting and expressing in their own distinct style. Even the mandalas or the sacred paintings underwent some transformations and was further improved upon with new

designs and different compositions. Thus, the Thangka painting developed in distinct and fullest form in Tibet with some regional variation.

Based on the technique employed and materials used, Thangkas can be primarily divided into two categories: *Bris-than*, painted scrolls and *Gothang* or *Gochen* or *Gos-than* woven or embroidered silk pictorial scrolls. Again there are several varieties under these two heads, to name a few: *Dras-drub-ma* -Thangkas done using appliqué technique; *Ihan-drub-ma* -Thangkas made by pasting coloured silk pieces of different shades on the canvas; *Tshem-drub-ma* - hand embroidered Thangkas with silk thread; *d'Par-ma* - Thangkas printed with the help of wooden or copper blocks. Further, *Bris-than*, depending on the different colours used in the background of the painted Thangkas can be divided into following categories : *Tson thang* is a Thangka having different colours for the background; *Ser thang*, in which the paintings have gold background with figures and designs drawn with ink or vermilion. *Nag thang*, the paintings have entirely black background and the rest of the work is done entirely in gold or sometimes with vermilion with some shading of other colours. These paintings often depict wrathful deities. *Mar thang*, in which the paintings have red background and they often depict peaceful deities. *Kyli khor* or *Mandala* is the floor plan of the deity. Each deity has a different form of *Mandala* in which the architectural details and colours symbolize different esoteric wisdoms. *Mandalas* are mostly circular in form with several divisions and sub divisions.

The theme of the painting may vary according to the occasion and the guidance of the lama for which the patron wishes to use it. Nevertheless, the dominant theme of almost all these scroll paintings remains sacred or religious in nature. The portrayal of Buddha Sakyamuni and his legendary life is an inexhaustible source in terms of themes. The paintings may portray peaceful and contemplative deities like Amoghasiddhi, who is associated with worthy accomplishment and infallible success, Manjusri for wisdom, Bhaisajyaguru or Medicine Buddha, also called Healing Buddha, said to dispense good health when worshipped properly. The depiction of wrathful deities in these paintings is considered as powerful tools in taming strong negative forces and generating positive energies; it also helps in destroying major obstacles to enlightenment like anger, greed and ignorance. For example, Vajrakilaya or Vajrakila is a winged dark blue wrathful deity or *heruka* whose characteristic implement is the *phurba* and who subdues opposing and chaotic forces. Mahakala, Yamantaka, Yama are few to name. Meditational deities or *yidams*, also called tutelary deities, is another theme for Thangka painting. These paintings are used for contemplative experience and to focus the mind during meditation.

It also serves as bestower of blessings or grace and as guide and protector. Tara, who assimilates the various characteristics and qualities of several goddesses form another theme. The depiction of Tara in green colour is believed to overcome fear and anxiety, she can also grant wishes, eliminates sufferings of all kinds and brings happiness; White Tara embodies motivation and compassion; Black Tara subdues evil spirits and cures any illness caused by them; Red Tara subjugates and removes obstacles. Ushnishavijaya, a female deity may be commissioned in the Thangka as a bestower of longevity of life of the patron. The Mandala or sphere of divine residence is another important theme of the Thangkas. Sometimes eight auspicious symbols or *tashi targye*, seven precious jewels or *nor-bu-chbdun* are also depicted in the Thangka paintings. Scholars and saints and depictions of events from their *samsara* or new iconographic form inspired by the visionary experience of great Buddhist teachers also acted as theme for these paintings. Another theme of the Thangka involves a central figure with a retinue of minor deities that traces the lineage of a particular teaching. The most common are the 'Refuge Tree' and 'Assembly Fields'.³ The 'Refuge Tree' depicts deities or sacred objects or principles in which sanctuary is sought. The 'Assembly Fields' Thangka is an aid in visualizing the totality of the guru's lineage. In this sacred painting a group of exalted beings, who were worshipped and to whom offerings were made is depicted. There are innumerable sacred subjects and reasons for painting a Thangka but commissioning and donation of Thangkas is always perceived as a meritorious act both for the patron and the artist.

According to Tibetan iconological theories recorded in treatise on sacred art, art works were traditionally classified into three main types each corresponding to an aspect of Buddhahood: enlightened body, speech or mind.⁴ Thus the Buddhist religious art forms which are generally regarded as *rten* or support can be classed in the following ascending order:

1. *Sku rten* (Bodily support)
2. *Gsung rten* (Verbal support)
3. *Thugs rten* (Mental support)

Thangkas which depict the physical form of the deities can be considered as *sku rten* or body support. There are also *rten* paintings which depict inanimate sacred objects, such as stupas, monasteries, because they represent support of enlightened mind. Some sacred paintings portray the events of the life of enlightened saint; these paintings are called narrative or biographical paintings. Some sacred paintings that taught or illustrated the Buddha doctrine only and did not portray the form of the Buddha or other deities

have been described as ‘didactic’. Dictatic Thangkas have illustrations of religious objects, religious artefacts or symbols, religious themes or motifs. Dictatic Thangkas are also regarded as *rtan* since they too express the aspects of Buddhist doctrine. What may be the art form, theme or classification of the painting, the main purpose of commissioning a Thangka was to evoke the high ideals of Buddhism, since these sacred paintings are considered as highly developed and important means of religious expression. It personifies the scriptures and mostly depicts the life and teaching of Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and spiritual symbols in Buddhism or Jataka tales. There is no denying of the fact that Buddhism is the central theme of these art works. Almost all Tibetan art takes its origin from the Buddhist teachings. It is the support of Dharma practice and the tool of Dharma propagation. It represents and preserves the essence of the Dharma.⁵ In earlier times in Tibet for the propagation of Buddhism monks and lamas used these paintings as a medium through which the Buddhist philosophy could be explained. Thangkas also suited the nomadic life of the Tibetans and the religious propagators who travelled to distant places since it could be easily rolled and transported. The Thangkas were used as didactic aid to illustrate their teaching and as an aid to meditative visualization.

Thangkas are undoubtedly a support of spiritual realization. Right from the beginning till the completion of the painting, religion and religious guidelines play a vital role. Unlike other art works Thangkas are not merely painted on the imagination of the artist; rather it is the joint work of religious preceptor, religious practitioner and the painter. There can be many reasons for commissioning a Thangka, the most common being to create an object of worship for ‘merit making’. In Buddhism ‘merit making’ means to earn credits for future benefits or happiness. It is not merely for material benefits or for the immediate life situation but to earn credits to reduce the effect of bad karma, and thus could earn them also Nirvana.⁶ Besides, Thangkas are commissioned to remove physical and mental obstacles; to ward off unwonted evils, to aid the recovery of sick person, to protect a person from negative forces. Sometimes they are commissioned at the commencement of new project, to bring about good health, patron’s longevity and prosperity or for the welfare of a newly born infant. For example, as mentioned in the above paragraph *Sgrol-dkar* or White Tara who is usually portrayed seated, dressed and crowned like Bodhisattvas, white in colour and in peaceful manifestation is commissioned as the ‘main figure’ in the painting to overcome obstacles. Similarly, *Sgrol-lijang*, Tara in green form or ‘Green Tara’ is iconographically depicted in the posture of ease and readiness for action. She is usually seen seated with her right leg outstretched and her

left leg folded in contemplative position, her both hands hold dark blue closed lotuses which symbolizes purity and power. Green Tara is intensely compassionate and acts quickly to help those who call upon her. She is usually painted in the Thangkas to overcome dangers, fears and anxieties. Blue Tara or *Ugra Tara* who is ferocious and terrifying in manifestation is usually invoked to destroy enemies; Red Tara or *Kurukulla* seen in red colour, in a dancing form and in terrifying manifestation is painted and worshipped as the goddess of love. To cite few more examples, 'Vajrapani' or *Chhyagna Dorje* is usually painted in dark blue colour, with a crown of skulls and holding a vajra. Vajrapani when represented in the painting either stands or sits carrying a lotus; sometimes he holds the vajra against the chest. He is looked upon as the rain god so he is depicted in the Thangkas when rain is needed or is too abundant. Manjushri or *Jyambheyang*, known as 'God of Divine wisdom' is shown in yellow, white, red and black forms, with the sword of knowledge in his right hand and the book of transcendent wisdom in his left hand. It is believed that his worship confers Mastery of the Dharma, retentive memory, mental perfection and eloquence. For example, Medicine Buddha or *Men- Lha* or also known as Healing Buddha as the name suggests, is said to dispense spiritual medicine when properly worshipped. It is even believed that merely touching the image can also be effective. He is depicted in the painting wearing a monastic robe, seated with the legs crossed. His right hand either holds a branch with fruit or the fruit alone of medicinal plant. His left hand in meditation posture usually holds a bowl. In the same way numerous other deities are commissioned as the main figure in the painting since it expresses aesthetic focus and spiritual gravity.

Thangkas are also spectacular paintings which make a strange use of the spectrum. In the array of colours there is something of the prismatic in their concentration around the 'main figure', for example, Buddha, Tara, Kalachara, etc. and the other figures radiate from the central form or motif. Each of the different figures and colours of those representations in the Thangkas has a special meaning and significance for visual meditation. Buddhism placed much emphasis on the spiritual significance of few principal colours like white, black, red, green and yellow, which naturally influenced the development and practice of Buddhist aesthetics. The enumeration of the colours may change but the number remains five. For example, in the Kalachakra Tantra the four elements-air, fire, water and earth are identified with four different colours-black (blue), red, white and yellow respectively. The following quotation from the Chandamaharosana Tantra also attests to the fact these colours were canonized as rich in symbolism: Black

symbolizes hate and anger; White denotes rest and thinking; Yellow stands for restraining and nourishing; Red for subjugation and Green for exorcism. If one has to look into the colour scheme in Buddhist art or Thangkas, such a short paragraph cannot cover everything rather it will act only as a tip of an iceberg. Nonetheless one cannot deny the fact that each colour is endowed with symbolic significance and its use in the painting in calculated quantities is to produce powerful visual and emotive effects.

In traditional Tibet, the painting of Thangkas occupied a revered place and it had to be done with utmost care and diligence for the benefit of the patron and the artist. Often before the creation of the Thangka a lama is consulted to get an advice on which the deity should be depicted in the painting. Very often a lama prepares a sketch showing the manner and relative positions of each figure in the painting. The painting may have one main central figure or many figures. A deity becomes a 'main figure' or 'minor figure' in a given painting according to the immediate spiritual wishes or priorities of the devotee or patron commissioning the work.⁷ Besides, Thangkas are also painted by artistically inclined gurus or lamas to glorify their lineages or convey the richness or inspiration of their tradition. Thangkas being explicitly religious in nature it is believed that if the work is not properly executed its devout intention will be lost. Thangkas are created in a careful and systematic way in accordance with guidelines laid out in Buddhist scriptures. Even the artists are generally expected to have proper training and religious understanding to create appropriate Thangka. The artists generally follow fixed patterns set by Buddhist iconography, canonical authority and artistic tradition regarding proportions, shape, colour, stance, hand positions and attributes in order to personify the Buddha or deities.⁸ The layout and composition of the Thangkas are primarily geometric arrangements of motifs, figures and images. The main figure is always positioned in the centre; the exact centre of the canvas is determined by diagonals which establish the vertical and horizontal axes. In relation to main figure are then placed all the other minor figures. From the religious point of view the correct establishment of the vertical and horizontal axes is important. The physical forms of deities to be painted have to be perfectly oriented in relation to the central axis. This is apparently crucial since a mistake here could affect the accuracy and hence the religious value of the Thangka.⁹ A painting of this tradition has its rule which allow one to interpret its arrangements systematically.

All the components of a Thangka (silk border and central painted) have iconographical significance.¹⁰ After the completion of the painting as a sacred object it has to be consecrated no matter what theme or what reason the Thangka has been commissioned

for. In consecrations, the physical aspects of the painting are dissolved and transformed into embodiments of Enlightenment.¹¹ The ceremony of consecration primarily performed by the highly regarded lama is of utmost importance since it elevates the status of a Thangka from a piece of art to sacred spiritual one, thereby giving its liturgical value. During the consecration ceremony on the reverse of the painting a particular mantra associated with the painted deity is inscribed. Without consecration no Buddhist would think of keeping these paintings in their religious altar. Once the Thangka is completed and consecrated regardless of what the painting has been commissioned for, it is hung in the place of honour with the belief that it has the power to transmit religious sentiments and induce religious inspiration and devotion. Thangkas are made for a variety of purposes and not solely for use in meditation.¹² It is used in marriage ceremony, any form of religious procession and even during funeral procession.

Traditions and culture change and evolve through time. This is true in case of traditional Thangka paintings too. In recent years many changes have taken place in the process of creation of Thangkas. For instance, it is no more confined within the boundaries of Tibet. As a result of commercial and cultural interaction with the outside world and exile of the Tibetans from Tibet to far and distant lands, the art has also travelled far and wide. The tradition of Thangka painting started in Tibet but it is no more confined to Tibet or Tibetans, rather it is popular among other communities who adopted Tibetan Buddhism like Tamangs, Sherpas, Yolmos, Newars and even in south east Asian countries. Earlier commissioning of Thangkas were primarily and exclusively a sacred affair but with the growth of international market for these paintings there is a shift towards commercialization, too. No longer are Thangkas solely painted for religious accumulation of merit. Under commercial pressure in the late twentieth century many of the values are also no longer religiously practiced.¹³ In the present day co-existing with the traditional monastically trained lamas who paint in traditional manner only for monasteries and religious purposes, there are Thangka painters who learn this art from different tribal and professional backgrounds and paint for the commercial market. Tibetan Buddhism might bemoan the inevitable shifts that occur through the migration and assimilation of western cultural and commercial values, but these changes cannot be halted.¹⁴

The patronage of the non Tibetan Buddhists all over the world has greatly helped in the revival of this art and its growth in the market. Tibetan Thangkas are gaining popularity among the Buddhist groups in various parts of Asia mainly for its style. The theme and the subject may not be alien to these buyers but the style, technique and method applied

in making these paintings is very distinct. Besides, the development of interest in the Tibetan form of Buddhism is also instrumental in the growth of market for Thangka paintings. The non-Tibetan Buddhists, who adopted Buddhism and different components of Tibetan culture, form another major group of Thangka buyers. Many of them visit Tibet, Nepal and India, where they receive teaching and initiation from the lamas, go on pilgrimage and procure religious objects including Thangkas.¹⁵ Due to its aesthetic beauty these paintings are also fast gaining ground as a valued piece of art in the international market. The powerful symbols with its symmetrical designs and the detailing of the figures make it aesthetically attractive. The array of bright vibrant colours used in the painting undoubtedly gives a strong visual impact. At times they are framed in a glass like western paintings. Along with other arts, Thangkas are also appreciated as hand made products. If the Thangka is painted in a genuine way following prescribed canonical authority and artistic tradition then it is very different from an ordinary work of modern art and is inherently highly sacred. As in sacred art of other cultures, Thangka paintings do not express the genius of the artist but it is an expression of the tradition. Thangkas testify the richness of the Tibetan culture and the continuity of this traditional cultural expression through monasteries and centres of Buddhist studies in several countries has also been supported by the spiritual guru of the Tibetans, His Holiness the Dalai lama.

Notes

- ¹ Santiago, J.R. 1999. *Thangka: The Sacred Painting of Tibet*. Delhi: Book Faith India.
- ² Tucci, G. 1980. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co.
- ³ Santiago, J.R. 1999. *Thangka: The Sacred Painting of Tibet*. Delhi: Book Faith India, pp.15.
- ⁴ Jackson, D. 2005. 'Lineages and Structure in Tibetan Buddhist Painting: Principles and Practice of an Ancient Sacred Choreography', *The Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, 1: (1-40) : 5.
- ⁵ Tulku, T. 2001. *Enlightened Journey: Buddhist Practice as Daily Life*. Boston: Sambhala Publication.
- ⁶ Santiago, J.R. 1999. *Thangka: The Sacred Painting of Tibet*. Delhi: Book Faith India, pp. 8.
- ⁷ Jackson, D. 2005. 'Lineages and Structure in Tibetan Buddhist Painting: Principles and Practice of an Ancient Sacred Choreography', *The Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies*, 1: (1-40) : 9.
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- ¹⁰ Huntington, J.C. 1970. 'The Technique of Tibetan Paintings', *Studies in Conservation*, 15 (2): 122-133.
- ¹¹ Bentor, Y. 1993. 'Tibetan Tourist Thangkas in the Kathmandu Valley', *Annals of Tourism Research*, 20.1 (107-137): 112.
- ¹² Dagyal, L. S. 1977. *Tibetan Religious Art*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz. pp. 28.

- ¹³ Deborah, J H. 1995. 'Insights for Contemporary Artists from the Traditions of Russian Icon Writers and Tibetans Thangka Painters', *Cosmos: Journal of the Traditional Cosmology Society*, 119 (2) (155-172): 166.
- ¹⁴ Harris, C.1993. Desperately Seeking the Dalai Lama. In : S. Gupta (ed.) *Disrupted Borders : An Intervention in Definitions of Boundaries*. London : Rivers oram Press.
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