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Thangka Painting: An Exploration of Tibetan Buddhism Through Art

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Thangka Painting: An Exploration of Tibetan Buddhism Through Art
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THANGKA PAINTING: AN EXPLORATION OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM THROUGH ART

Abstract
Thangka painting is an ancient Tibetan Buddhist art form which depicts Buddhist deities. The deities must be made in very specific proportions, as it is believed that the deities can inhabit the paintings and thus the painting must be of the utmost beauty. Thangkas have a variety of uses, but they are mostly used as a means of gaining merit, in death rituals, during meditation, and in Buddhist ceremonies. In order to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism, I spent two and a half weeks studying thangka painting. I learned the entire process of creating a thangka, from the creation of the canvas to the final painting. I completed one painting of Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. In addition, I interviewed four individuals about thangka: a lama, a doctor, a thangka master, and an average Tibetan Buddhist. The objective of this study was to learn how studying the thangka art form can enhance our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism.

Creating this thangka has given me a basic understanding of Tibetan Buddhism and will serve as a way I can share Tibetan culture with others.

*Topic codes:* Art History, Asian Studies, Fine Arts, Religion

*Keywords:* thangka, Tibetan Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha
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Introduction

Thangkas are the foremost Tibetan Buddhist art style. They are generally paintings of Buddhist deities and symbols, however some serve as illustrative teaching aids in Traditional Tibetan Medicine. One of the most unique aspects of thangkas is that deities must be replicated in exact proportions. It is believed that during prayer deities can inhabit the thangkas, but they only will if it is a beautiful work of art; thus only the proportions created by high lamas, often resulting from visions, are considered suitable (Wein, 2016). Thangkas painted by high lamas are usually considered more beautiful and profound than those painted by others due to their immediate religious connection. The backgrounds, in contrast to the figures, are up to the artist’s discretion, although these often follow similar styles. In terms of the canvas size, thangkas can be found in a variety of sizes, ranging from less than a foot in height to several meters, but the average thangka is several feet in height and width (Wein, 2016). Thangka painters are usually Tibetan Buddhists who spend at least six years studying the art, although all monks are trained in thangka painting as well. It is important that the painter is Tibetan Buddhist, because “the painter has to have good motivation” when painting the thangka in order for it to be considered “good” (Wein, 2016). After completion, the religious aspect is compounded by a consecration ceremony performed by monks.

History

In Buddhist lore, thangkas originated during the time of Sakyamuni Buddha when King Bimbisara of Magodha was given armor made of precious stones by King Uttrayana of Dadok. King Bimbisara, however, did not have the means to give a gift of equivalent monetary value, so he commissioned a painting of the Buddha instead. But when the painters

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1 Aang
2 Sokka
3 Aang
4 Iroh
went to paint the Buddha, they were blinded by his holy light. Sakyamuni thus had the painters observe his reflection in water instead, allowing them to paint him, thus beginning the tradition of thangka. This story is also the origination of the Buddhist idea that thangkas also house the spiritual force of deities; since the painters were blinded by the Buddha’s spiritual light and then had to paint his reflection, they also captured some of his spiritual reflection in doing so (McGuckin, 1996).

It is unclear when thangkas arrived in Tibet, but they became popular between the seventh and twelfth centuries. While thangkas are a distinctly Tibetan art style, they originated in India and have Chinese and Nepali influence (McClure).

**Tibetan Buddhism**

A basic knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism is essential in order to understand thangkas. Prior to Buddhism’s introduction to Tibet, the majority religion was Bön (Powers, 2007). Bön is an animistic religion, which includes shamanistic aspects and worship of a variety of nature deities. According to Tibetan lore, Buddhism first entered Tibet in 233 CE during the reign of Totori Nyentsen, when Buddhist texts and relics fell from the sky onto the emperor’s roof. This event was so important that the Tibetan calendar is dated in years after this event. Tibetans’ first official historical encounter with Buddhism was during the rule of Songtsen Gampo in seventh century CE (Powers, 2007). Tibet was a major military force, and as it expanded its borders it encountered Buddhism in neighboring countries. Buddhism gained momentum during the rule of Tri Songdetsen in the late eighth century (Powers, 2007). Songdetsen was a devout Buddhist and invited Indian scholars to help spread Buddhism in Tibet. One such scholar, Padmasambhava, was met with a series of natural disasters which were attributed to Bön deities. Padmasambhava is said to have gone into a deep meditative state and was able to transform the Bön deities into Buddhist deities across Tibet. This feat
impressed many people throughout Tibet, which catalyzed Tibet’s conversion to a Buddhist country (Powers, 2007).

The most important belief in Buddhism is that everything in life is suffering (Powers, 2007). Though people may experience occasional happiness, it eventually will end and return to suffering. All beings are stuck in cyclic existence, where after each sentient being dies they are reincarnated in one of the six realms (demon, hungry ghost, animal, human, demi-god, and god). Where one is reborn is dependent upon one’s karma, which is accrued over lifetimes by the good or bad actions committed by the individual. If one commits a number of negative acts, they gain bad karma, which can lead to individuals having more strife during their lives and even to being born into one of the lower three realms (demon, hungry ghost, and animal). However, if one commits positive acts, they gain good karma, which can lead to positive consequences and being born into one of the upper realms (human, demi-god, and god) (Powers, 2007).

Since life is suffering, and beings are constantly being thrown back into life after dying, Buddhists attempt to find a way out of this cycle. Around fifth century BCE, Siddartha Gautama (the Buddha) preached a method for reaching nirvana, or exiting the reincarnation cycle. His teachings, known as sutras, were compiled after his death by a council which determined which teachings were truly those of the Buddha (Powers, 2007).

Despite having this official compilation, several schools of Buddhism exist. There are three major schools: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Theravada is mostly found throughout Southeast Asia, and is mainly focused upon individual enlightenment. The ultimate goal in Theravada is to become a Buddha, or a being who has reached nirvana. Mahayana, which is one of the major types found in Tibet, focuses upon reaching enlightenment for the good of other beings. The ultimate goal in Mahayana is to become a
bodhisattva, which is a being who has reached enlightenment but continues to work for the enlightenment of all beings. Vajrayana, also known as Tantric Buddhism, is an accelerated version of Mahayana, involving a number of high level methods for attaining enlightenment in order to quickly become enlightened. Vajrayana is also found in Tibet, however it is mostly reserved for a small number of monks (Powers, 2007).

It is also worth noting that there are four schools within Tibetan Buddhism. However, they all use thangkas in the same way, so their differences will not be explored in this paper.5

Purpose

Thangkas have four main purposes. First, they act as a method for gaining merit, which is what accrues good karma (Wein, 2016). This was often the motivation behind commissions, which was the traditional way which thangkas were funded. Second, they aid the dead during transmigration. After death, beings take seven to 49 days to be reincarnated, during which karma can still be influenced (Powers, 2007). Thus thangkas can be used to positively influence a deceased being’s karma through death rituals conducted by monks. Third, they are used in single point meditation (Wein, 2016). Thangkas act as a body support, which is an item which aids in meditation. By looking at the thangka during meditation, it is easier to focus solely upon the object of meditation, which is often the deity shown in the thangka. Lastly, they are used in a variety of tantric practices, in a similar way to during single point meditation (Wein, 2016).

Thangkas have also traditionally been used as a teaching tool. Monks used to use them to teach younger monks or laypeople about Buddhism, as often many people were illiterate (McClure). Additionally, they are used in Traditional Tibetan Medicine to illustrate

5 Aang
a number of medical ideas, from medicinal plants and minerals to the stages of a human embryo. 6

Commercialization

With the increasing tourism in Tibetan areas, thangkas have quickly become commercialized. Their beauty and ease of transportation makes them an ideal marketable item to tourists (McClure). Tibetan Buddhist perspective on this is largely positive. According to Aang Lama, the commercialization is beneficial because it propagates Buddhism. When tourists look at or purchase thangkas, they will notice that not all thangkas are the same. In his opinion, this will spark curiosity in tourists, leading them to learn more about Tibetan Buddhism. In this way, the commercialization of thangka can further Buddhism’s influence.

Initially, Iroh, an average practicing Tibetan Buddhist, was upset by the commercialization. To him, he didn’t see the purpose of tourists purchasing thangkas and considered it disrespectful for non-believers to purchase something so holy without using it in its intended way. But after further thought, his opinion changed. This change was based around the realization that everything is just material, including thangkas. The power in thangkas do not lie in the paintings themselves, but in the heart of the practitioner. Additionally, he found that only around one in 10,000 tourists actually purchase a thangka. Of these individuals, around 70% have a basic knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, and so they may actually use the thangkas according to their intended purpose. Most importantly, the commercialization of thangkas has allowed the art to continue to prosper. A single thangka is often passed down through generations, with a new thangka being purchased by a family maybe every 30 years. Further, labor laws have driven up the price for thangkas, making

6 Dr. Katara
purchasing a new thangka a financially difficult task for rural Tibetans. Thus, without commercialization the art of thangkas could die.

**Methods**

**Background research**

My background research was informed by a series of interviews, online articles, observing other thangka artwork, and instruction from a thangka master. Interviews were conducted in Shangri-La City, Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan, China. This place was chosen because it is a largely Tibetan Buddhist area which also has a few thangka painting schools. I chose to interview four individuals to get an overall view of the role of thangkas in Tibetan Buddhists’ lives: a lama, a doctor, a thangka master, and an everyday Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. I felt that the lama would be able to give an in-depth perspective of the role of thangkas in Tibetan Buddhism. The doctor was able to explain the use of thangkas in Traditional Tibetan Medicine. The thangka master was able to provide perspective on the creative process of thangka paintings. The everyday Tibetan Buddhist was able to give insight into how thangkas are used in the average Tibetan Buddhist’s life.

Observing other thangkas was a key aspect of learning how to create a thangka. Thangkas must be recreated with exact proportions and replications of previously used techniques. Thus observation was key to understand how my own creative work should be made.

Most importantly, a thangka master taught me step-by-step and helped to correct my mistakes during the thangka creation process.

**Artistic process**

Before I began painting my first thangka, I had to practice the thangka art style. Since the images of deities are required to be in very specific proportions, I worked off of a book
which illustrated a number of deities on top of grids (see Appendix A). My thangka master told me to start with one of the most classic images, Sakyamuni seated on a platform while holding a pot (see Appendix A).

I measured the exact dimensions of the gridlines and drew them on a blank piece of paper. This was a bit difficult because I had no way to ensure that the corners were 90°, so I had to do my best to estimate accurate corners. Another difficulty was that often the gridlines were not at an exact measurement on the ruler, so I would also have to estimate approximately where the lines were. Being off by a tenth of a millimeter could drastically impact the proportions, so I had to be very careful when doing this.

Once I had all of the lines drawn, I began to transpose the image on top of the lines. There is a very methodical way to drawing this: first, one draws the outline of the face, then draws the cloth on the body, then draws the extremities and pot, then completes the figure with the facial features, then finishes with the platform and halo lines. The gridlines were vital in determining the exact proportions of Sakyamuni, and I was able to transpose a fairly accurate image over the course of seven hours. The most difficult part was the hands, as there are a lot of small aspects which build on each other. If you draw one part of a finger incorrectly, this can cause the rest of the hand to be drawn incorrectly.

After successfully re-creating the image of Sakyamuni, I spent a day practicing drawing aspects of the background (see Appendix A). My thangka master had me practice three of the main thangka background elements: water, clouds, and earth. Unlike deities, backgrounds do not have to be of the exact dimensions of previously created thangkas. For this reason, I found the background elements a bit more challenging than the Buddha. While the backgrounds were less complex than the Sakyamuni, the lack of gridlines made it more difficult to draw aesthetically pleasing proportions.
The last step before creating the thangka itself was practicing painting. When creating thangkas, colors are filled in then outlines are painted over the pencil guidelines which have been initially drawn on the canvas. Since filling in uniform blocks of color is fairly straightforward, I only practiced how to paint color gradients. First, one paints a dark line along the edge of the area being painted. Then, one sucks on the tip of the brush to decrease the color intensity, and paints a bit below the darker section. This is repeated until the whole area is filled. I also practiced outlining, using black paint with a small brush (see Appendix A). One is supposed to begin each cloth line thinner, get thicker as the line continues, and end with a thin line again. At maximum, the outlining lines are one or two millimeters in thickness. This technique is fairly challenging, as one must modulate pressure while still painting the correct outline.

After adequate practice of these techniques, I began making the thangka canvas. First, linen cloth was cut to the size of a premade wooden frame. Then a cord was sewn approximately one inch in along the edges of the cloth, leaving loops at each corner (see Appendix B). After this, slits were cut along the inside of the cord using a knife. A small slit was placed in each corner.

The cloth was then suspended in the wooden frame by running a rope through the slits. The rope was pulled as tight as possible, in order to make the linen into a taught surface. The linen was then treated with a mixture of yak glue and water. This was done by coating each side with a cloth soaked in the mixture, followed by rubbing the surface on both sides simultaneously with the hands. This was then allowed to dry, creating a thin layer of a drywall-like consistency. After this, another mixture of white clay powder and water was applied to both sides using a cloth. This was smoothed by forcefully rubbing a stone over the surface (see Appendix C).
Next, I drew gridlines onto the dried canvas in the same manner as I had practiced on paper (see Appendix D). While I could erase on the canvas, it did not erase nearly as well as on paper, so I had to be more careful with the lines. It took approximately three days to complete the figure and the background. After the outline was done, I painted the background (see Appendix E). The sky and highlights on parts of the ground utilized the fading technique previously practiced, while the rest was filled in solidly. Solid areas had to be painted from left to right to ensure uniformity, and often had to have two layers. Following this method, the rest of the thangka was painted (see Appendix F). Sakyamuni’s figure had to be colored very specifically, but the background colors could be chosen. My thangka master chose most of the colors for me, and also instructed me on how to shade the ground, the base and the clouds.

The next step was outlining and painting a red border. The cloth outline and body were red, while the rest was black. The last item to be painted was the eyes; it is believed that through the eyes the deities can inhabit the painting, so these are painted last in order to ensure that the deity inhabits a fully finished body. For the final product see Appendix G.

**Description and evaluation of creative work**

My final created work is a thangka of the Sakyamuni Buddha. His figure sits in the middle of the painting holding a begging bowl. His skin is colored yellow while his hair is blue, which are the colors which Sakyamuni must always be imaged in. He is draped in red and orange cloth, and the begging bowl he is holding is blue and white. His figure is surrounded by several halos, which signify his holiness. He is sitting on a platform which sits on part of the ground. The platform is in a traditional style, with lotus flower-like leaves lining the edge, which adds to the religious aspect as the lotus flower is an auspicious sign. The ground is surrounded by water, in which one can see a number of waves. At the bottom
of the picture, there is more land and an auspicious Buddhist symbol. To either side of Sakyamuni, mountains with waterfalls are pictured. In the sky a number of clouds can be seen. The sky, ground, waves, one of the halos, and clouds all are painted with a fading technique. Everything else is painted in solid block color or left to be white.

This piece’s creative aspects were largely informed by the artistic styles required by thangka painting. In this way, I hope the painting contains a fairly clear cultural message; since the Buddha was painted in the traditional style, I hope that the artwork conveys his traditional importance in Tibetan Buddhist culture.

The intended audience for this artwork is mostly myself. Through this project, I gained a huge appreciation for thangkas and Tibetan Buddhism. I plan to keep my art as a way to remember what I have learned while studying thangka painting. I think it will also be a good conversation starter with others in the US. This can serve as a good mode of sharing what I have learned about Tibetan Buddhism and culture with others.

**Analysis and evaluation**

I believe that I successfully created a thangka painting. For the most part, the Buddha’s features and proportions are fairly accurate. While there are always places where I personally do not think everything looks exactly as it should, most people react very positively when shown the thangka which indicates to me that I was probably successful in completing my art. Additionally, my thangka teacher, others who worked with him and a lama said it looked good, so this probably indicates that my work was effective.

If I could do the project again, I would have wanted to learn some of the Tibetan language. Thangkas are often accompanied with Tibetan scripture on the back, and I think it would have enhanced the cultural value of my painting if I had been able to include some scripture on the back as well.
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Conclusion

Through creating a thangka, I have learned a lot about Tibetan culture. Since Tibetan Buddhism is so deeply intertwined with the creation of thangkas, this has been a very effective way to understand more about Tibetan culture. Through studying thangkas, I have been able to learn about the basic premise of Tibetan Buddhism and about a few of the deities. At this point, I am able to identify some of the major deities in Buddhist art by body positioning and color. I have also gained insight into how the Shangri-La City has changed over the past decade, as I have been able to learn about the commercialization of thangkas. Tourism has greatly impacted local life, and I am glad that it is at least leading to the preservation of some aspects of Tibetan life.

In the future, it would be interesting to observe how thangkas are used in Buddhist ceremonies. I am very curious about the consecration ceremony and would enjoy learning how more about thangkas’ uses firsthand.
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References


Interviews

*Note: names have been changed to protect privacy.*


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Appendix A

Practicing thangka art style
Illustrations from drawing practice. From left to right, top to bottom: drawing practice book, figure practice, background practice (twice), lucky fish, and outline practice.
Appendix B

Sewing the cloth

Images of the creation of the cloth canvas. Size and cord sewing can be seen.
Appendix C

Creating the canvas

Image of the canvas smoothing process.
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Appendix D

Sketching on canvas

Images of the initial grid and sketch on the canvas.
Appendix E

Background painting

Image of background painting.
Appendix F

Painting progression

Images of painting progress, showing method of starting from background then continuing to figure.
Appendix G

Final product

Image of finished thangka painting.