

Religious, Cultural, and Modern Influences on Tibetan Thangka Paintings

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Abstract:

This research paper explores how cultural, political, and religious contexts have shaped the tradition of Tibetan Thangka paintings. The Tibetan Thangka acts both as religious sacred objects and as an artwork. My interest in this subject began when I first saw a tangka painting in real life, and I was so curious about this art style which led me to further investigate this topic. This research paper analyzed journal articles, looked at many thangkass from different time periods in different styles, and interviewed Tibetan and non-Tibetan people about their perceptions of a few Thangka paintings with varied styles. This study found out that Tibetan thangkass have changed by a lot of influences globally and locally, including political influences of mainland China and the western cultural influences. This research highlights the importance of preserving the spiritual and the culture of the Tibetan Thangka paintings and acknowledges that some are slowly adapting to become more modern.

Keywords: Tibet, Thangka, artwork, preservation

Introduction:

Many styles of Tibetan art reflect the spiritual and cultural heritage of Buddhism, and one of the artistic forms is thangkass, scroll paintings used for meditation and depicting religious scenes. I was first introduced to thangkass when I saw one on the wall of my home. I was very drawn to the piece by the vivid colors and the deep meaning behind it. This made me more interested in learning about Tibetan culture and the intricate art of thangka painting. As I started to research more, I realized the importance of understanding the history and borders surrounding these artworks. This research paper explores the cultural significance, history, and impact of Tibetan thangkass. Meanwhile, I included thangkass from different periods to illustrate the changes this art has gone through, and for every art piece, I interviewed two people, one Tibetan and one person who is neither Tibetan, nor familiar with Tibetan art, to demonstrate the impacts on audiences with different cultural backgrounds. Traditional Tibetan Thangkass have

undergone major changes due to the deep-rooted Buddhist traditions, influences from international conservation communities, and the cultural influence from China, resulting in an evolution of Tibetan Thangka's symbolism as a result of regional and global impacts.

From antiquity to the modern era, Tibetan Thangka paintings have evolved considerably under the influence of cultural exchanges. Allinger (2011) focuses particularly on those dedicated to the Vajradhātu Mandala, the symbolic embodiment of Buddhism. By examining the iconographic and stylistic features of thangkass that date from the 12th century onwards, Allinger (2010) traces the artistic and cultural influences on Tibetan thangka art, including Newar and Chinese elements, and how these were integrated into Tibetan art. Allinger concludes that by around 1200, many iconographic themes in Tibetan art had been established. The passage concludes with detailed comparisons of thangka elements and stylistic features, based upon securely dated materials from various collections and museums.



Figure 1: Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo, b.1110 - d.1170, Rubin Museum of Art

Created in 12th century, “Pakmodrupa” is a Tibetan thangka that depicts the figure Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo, a significant spiritual leader and teacher in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. The artwork depicts its subject with intricate details while using vibrant colors and symbolic elements that highlight Pakmodrupa’s spiritual achievements and teachings. Traditional thangkas such as this one are used both as a devotional objects for meditation and as a didactic tool drawing from the rich traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The elements are so obvious that even non-Tibetan audience may understand its religious underpinnings. When asked how they perceive this artwork, the Tibetan interviewee said, “Looks like a traditional Tibetan painting. The person in the middle looks like a monk with thangkas surrounding around him.” Non-Tibetan interviewee responded, “This piece looks like a Buddhist painting, looks like it was painted a long time ago and looks very traditional. It looks like it might be from India or Tibet, countries that believe in the religion Buddhism.” Both of them recognized the source and the meaning it tries to convey, indicating that the painting is very representative of what thangkas mean to represent. Fast-forward to 20th century, Fraser (2011) investigates how the techniques and traditions of medieval Buddhist art were rediscovered and preserved in the early 1940s

through the collaboration of Zhang Daqian, a Chinese artist, and five Reb gong artists from the Sku ‘bum Monastery. These traditions were still vibrant and influential well into the 20th century. The cultural exchange during the 1940s preserved these traditions. The history of Buddhist art in regions like Dunhuang would have otherwise been lost to Chinese scholars and artists. One of the most famous painting created in this period is Zhang Daqian’s “Portrait of Guanyin from Dunhuang Fresco.”



Figure 2: Zhang Daqian’s “Portrait of Guanyin from Dunhuang Fresco”

Zhang's "Portrait of Guanyin from Dunhuang Fresco" depicts the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin, shown with the vibrant colors and intricate details. The serene expression and the graceful posture reflect Guanyin's divine benevolence, as with the surrounding elements, including the lotus base and halo which emphasize the spiritual and symbolic nature of the figure. This piece is inspired by ancient frescoes during the Dunhuang period, showcasing Zhang Daqian's ability to blend traditional Chinese art with his own unique style.

When asked their opinion of this painting, the Tibetan interviewee responded, "This piece looks like a 'Droma' (a Buddhist god-name in Tibetan language). There are so many paintings and drawings of her, this is a standing one and it looks like a more modern style of drawing. I think that this piece looks like it's from China." Non-Tibetan interviewee said, "I know that this is the Guanyin (A Buddhist god - Chinese name). I know that it is a very famous Buddhist god and is very important in the Chinese culture. This painting might be from China and looks a bit ancient." Both of them can recognize the subject of this painting and highlight the influence of Chinese art.

Then in the 21st century, modern elements start to show in thangkas. Lehtisalo (2011) explores how these sacred artworks depict the Enlightenment, which is a blend of natural elements with religious symbolism. The purpose of this passage is to analyze the evolution of Thangka art, especially in the context of modern influences and the number of Tibetan artists that have left their homeland to mainland China. The paper concludes that while traditional styles dominate Tibetan art, contemporary artists are incorporating new techniques and materials, leading to a fusion of classical and modern elements. The author arrives at this conclusion through a detailed examination of various Thangka paintings from different times, noting the impact of cultural and artistic exchanges on this living tradition. The research provides a comprehensive analysis of both traditional and modern Thangka paintings while also highlighting the dynamic nature of this art form. It also shows the cultural significance and the adaptability of Thangka art in contemporary art contexts. Tibetan artists maintain their heritage while embracing modern artistic expressions. One modern element is the exploration of identity. Ina Goel (2020) explores the intersection of Tibetan Thangka painting and individual identity formation among artists. The author's purpose is to examine how Thangka artists, traditionally anonymous, navigate personal identity and self-expression through their art. By creating Thangka paintings, these artists incorporate parts of their own identities into the divine images they produce. The author concludes that Thangka paintings serve as a "site for the coincidence of opposites," blending Tibetan

symbolism with human psychology to express freedom and individuality beyond the constraints of tradition (Goel, 2020). This passage offers a deep insight into the lived experiences of Thangka artists. The paper's strength is its ability to connect cultural practices with contemporary identity issues. Goel's research supports my discussion of how traditional art forms undergo evolution in modern contexts, emphasizing the dynamic relationship between cultural expression and individual identities.

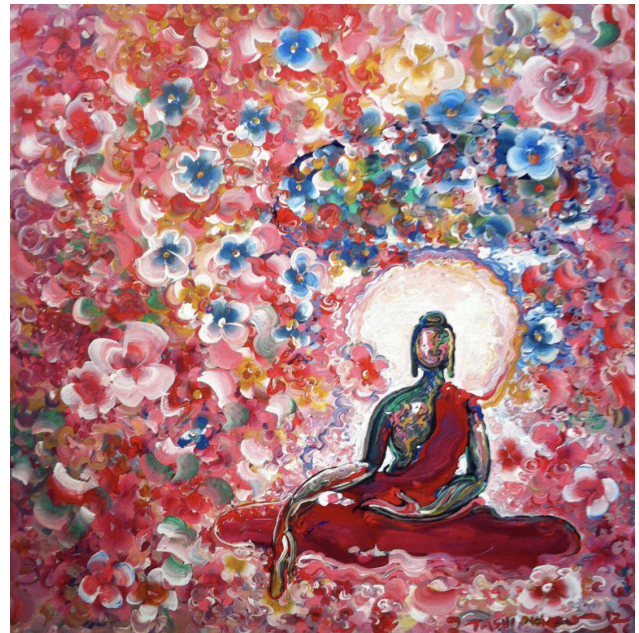


Figure 3: Tashi Norbu's depiction of Buddha

Tashi Norbu is a Tibetan born monk and a contemporary artist. His painting often infuses modern elements. His artwork above shows a calm Buddha sitting in meditation, surrounded by a lively mix of colorful flowers. The bright flowers contrast with the peaceful Buddha, showing calmness but also energy with the bright flower background. The use of vivid colors and movement of the flower gives the artwork a lively and spiritual feeling.

In their response to this painting, the Tibetan interviewee answered, "This one looks like a modern drawing of Buddha that is in meditation, the inspiration looks like it's drawn from the Buddha meditating under the tree and being enlightened with all the flowers." Similarly, the non-Tibetan interviewee said, "This art piece looks very modern and I can see that there is a Buddha in the photo, the mood feels very happy and joyful." Both of them can recognize the modern elements embodied in this painting and the religious symbol.

Since the creation of this art form, thangkas have gone through major evolution, due to cultural influences and exchanges. On its early stage, the painting focuses more on the religious symbolism and teachings, and with the

influence of Chinese and modern culture later, thangka paintings started to show these elements. Today, with the influence of international conservation communities, this art form starts to go through a different stage.

The international conservation communities have downplayed the religious symbolism that Tibetan Thangkas transmit in significant ways. Originally, Western conservation practices are focused primarily on the scientific aspects of these artworks, most of the time ignoring their spiritual and cultural values. Western museums, for instance, sometimes separated the religious value from the paintings treating them just as artworks that could be replaced or removed at any time (Cotte, 2010). This highlights a big difference in terms of the nature of the thangkas as understood in their original cultural context. This approach stemmed from a tendency to appreciate thangkas as individual works of art rather than as sacred objects embedded in a spiritual tradition. For instance, in Australia, the conservation of Tibetan thangkas has sparked a big interest and discussion. The Tibetan Thangkas in Australia are mainly housed in art galleries and private collections. This practice reflects an approach that prioritizes aesthetic and historical perspectives over their religious significance (Cotte, 2010). Furthermore, the commercial market of thangkas has led to many restoration attempts that ignored the original composition and meanings of the Thangka (Cotte, 2010). The increased appreciation of thangkas as art in the West shows a big contrast with their treatment in Tibetan culture, where damaged thangkas might traditionally be repainted or replaced entirely. This fundamental difference shows how international conservation practices have redefined the meaning of Tibetan thangkas, prioritizing physical preservation and aesthetic value over their original spiritual significance. The international conservation communities have somewhat altered the meaning of Tibetan Thangkas by promoting their transformation from a religious artifact into a contemporary art form. This shift is shown to us by artists like Ang Tsherin Sherpa, whose work has moved beyond traditional religious confines to engage with modern themes while still retaining Buddhist elements. His journey illustrates traditional Buddhist art and contemporary issues of buying and selling the art, highlighting tensions and adaptations within Tibetan cultural preservation (Burnett, 2011).



Figure 4: Ang Tsherin Sherpa's "Two Spirits"

This painting by Ang Tsherin Sherpa shows two fierce figures, one red and one blue, crouching and staring at each other. Butterflies surround them, creating a contrast between their intense expressions and the elegant butterflies. The dripping paint on their bodies and the ABC blocks at the bottom adds a modern touch to the traditional painting style, mixing old and new elements. When asked their responses to this work, the Tibetan interviewee said, "This one looks like a modern artist's drawing but with the traditional style of drawing the face body, hand and feet. It has some traditional style but also modern art touches, so I would say it's very creative."

Also recognizing the modern elements, the non-Tibetan interviewee responded, "This art piece also looks more modern. Even though the figures in the picture look more ancient, I can see the modern elements in this piece like the ABC logo and the butterflies above."

There are other attempts to modernize Tibetan Thangkas, incorporating Western cultural artifacts while diminishing their original religious undertones. Leigh Miller (2016) explores how Tibetan contemporary artist Gadé and his peers have redefined traditional Tibetan Thangkas by separating them from their religious context. Gadé's work is very different from traditional Buddhist symbols, with the addition of modern global icons, reflecting a broader trend in contemporary Tibetan art where artists aim to place traditional art forms in a more contemporary context. This shift challenges the conventional association of Tibetan art with Buddhism, highlighting a new cultural discourse that embraces personal expression and modernity. Gadé's approach is seen as reclaiming agency amidst colonialism and globalization, emphasizing the secularization and hybridization of Tibetan cultural identity (Miller, 2016).



Figure 5: Gadé's "Father's Nightmare"

This painting by Gadé shows a person sleeping with black smoke rising from his head, filled with nightmares and what you could imagine "hell" is like. The dream contains images of monsters, people getting hanged, blood baths, and other elements that people might imagine in hell. The dark smoke and red background create a sense of tension while using a mix of traditional and modern elements to depict the fear. The painting still has some religious elements, though shown implicitly, such as the sleeping gesture and the "bed" the man sleeps on.

In this interview, Tibetan interviewee could recognize the religious elements and said, "In Tibet we say that if you do good things in life when you die you go to heaven and if you do bad things in life you go to hell and get punished. In this piece the guy laying down looks like he's imagining what would look like if he went to hell. I can see from his dreams that there are people getting the blood bath and also some people that are getting eaten by the animals and hanged. This art style is a common Tibetan art style, and I have seen a lot of art in this style before." However, the non-Tibetan interviewee focused more on its modern elements and said, "This one looks like the person in the picture is dreaming about their after life, the painting doesn't look like it's from too long ago but it's not modern." It is obvious that when thangka paintings have a broader range of global audiences, the religious elements seem to become vague.

Conclusion:

This research has examined the history, symbolism, and role of Tibetan thangka paintings. It has gone through many influences from Buddhism traditions, Chinese and international cultural exchanges, and individual artists who infuse modernity into their thangka paintings. This art form is evolving when its range of audiences expands and when modernity takes hold. Specifically, its religious connotation fades when thangkas are put in the global context. Thangkas are not just artworks, but also very sacred religious objects used for meditation and teaching. The significance of thangkas is in their spiritual and cultural value which reflects the essence of Tibetan Buddhism. This research contributes to Tibetan studies and Buddhist art, highlighting the need to preserve these cultural treasures and appreciate their unique value.

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