

## Tibetan *Thangka* Art: A Brief Description and History

The thangka is a traditional Tibetan form of religious art originating in India whose subject or subjects may include buddhas, bodhisattvas, meditational deities, great teachers, and mandalas. Most thangkas are scroll paintings usually framed in a rich colorful silk brocade and have thin silk veil covering the front surface. They are distinctively Tibetan, highly religious, and possess a unique art style of their own. Tibetans have always considered the thangka a treasure of tremendous value.

There are different kinds of thangkas employing various canvases. However, most are painted on cloth or paper. The white cloth is first mounted on a frame and water-based colloid chalk is applied to the surface. It is polished with talc when dried. The canvas is thus ready for painting. Apart from this, there are thangkas which are webs of embroidery, woven silk, silk tapestry or appliqué. Embroidered thangkas are done with multi-colored silk threads. Silk woven thangkas take the warp of brocade as the base and apply the method of jacquard weaving with colored silk threads as the weft. With appliqué thangkas, human figures, designs and patterns are cut out of colored satin and glued onto the canvas. The resulting work is also called “embossed embroidery.” Tapestry thangkas are woven with the method of “complete warps and broken wefts: which calls for the application of the weft threads on the warp only where the picture or design needs it. The “hollowed out” work produces a three-dimensional effect. Tapestry thangkas are thick, closely woven, delicately designed and gorgeously decorated with colored silk threads. There is yet another kind of thangka in which beautifully designed colored fabrics decorated with pearls and precious stones are attached to the fabric with gold thread thereby creating a resplendent and dazzling effect.

Although always religious in nature, Tibetan thangkas cover a wide range of subject matters. Some depict the social history and customs and habits of Tibet. Others illustrate the Tibetan calendar, astronomy, and Tibetan traditional medicine and pharmacology. Biographical thangkas describe the major events in the life of religious figures and historical personages.



*White Tara*

The exact time of the origin of the thangka is yet known. However, Tibetan painting appeared before the 7<sup>th</sup> century when King Songtsen Gampo (617-650) unified the whole of Tibet. He married the Nepalese Princess Tszun and the Chinese Princess Wencheng. The two princesses brought with them large amounts of Buddhist scripture and many skilled craftsmen. Painting in general during this period relied heavily on mural art which had been developing for a long time. For this period on, Tibet with its flourishing Buddhism possessed two dazzling specimens of painting of equal importance: the thangka and mural painting.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, King Langdarma wiped out Buddhism in Tibet resulting in the extensive destruction of temples and with them countless thangkas, murals, and other relics. Thangkas that survived this period are very rare and cannot be seen except for the few kept in Rasa Trulnang Tsok Lak Kang Temple and the Samye Tsuklak Kang Temple.

After the establishment of the rule of the Dalai Lamas in the fifteenth century, thangka art flourished and reached a new height of artistic perfection. Thangkas increased significantly in number and different schools of painting with distinctive styles of their own appeared. During the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Losang Gyatso (167-1680), renowned painters were assembled to devote their time and efforts solely to the painting of thangkas. There were also thangkas contributed by worshippers and those painted by skilled lamas. Temples and monasteries in Tibet were centers of culture and many eminent lamas were not only respected Buddhist philosophers but also outstanding painters. The famous Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyaltzen painted the portrait of Manjushri on a wall of the North Sakya Temple. Tsongkhapa, founder of the Gelukpa Sect, once painted a self-portrait and sent it to his mother.

Thangkas serve many purposes in Tibetan society. In times past, the aristocracy kept a number of thangkas as precious heirlooms. Ordinary people also invited artists to create thangkas for them for religious purposes or to commemorate certain events. Thangkas are considered works of stateliness and, therefore, are found in the halls and living quarters of all temples and monasteries. Thangkas afford us important material for studying the religion, history, culture, painting, arts and crafts, and scientific achievements of Tibet.

(Excerpted and summarized from the "Preface" by Rezin Dorji, Ou Chaogui, and Yishi Wangchu—found in the album *The Tibetan Thangka*.)