

Tibetan Thangkas



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*Lady of the White Parasol (Pasting)*

## 西藏系列画册

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*Buddha Painting Unfolded in the Palkor  
Monastery in Gyangze*



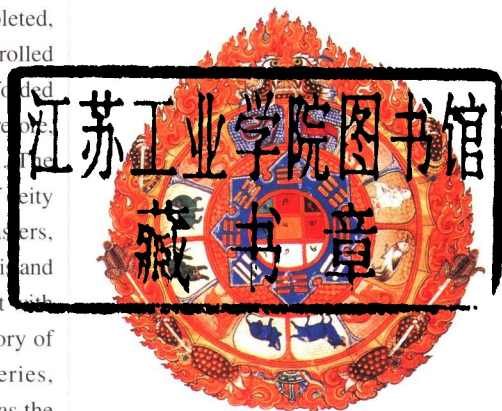
# Tibetan Thangkas

By Liao Dongfan

In Tibetan the word Thangka means a kind of painting done on a flat surface. It is the most typical kind of Tibetan paintings. When a thangka is completed, it is usually mounted on silk and scrolled for storage. When in need, it is unfurled and hung on the specific places. Therefore, it is also called the painted scroll. The main theme of thangkas is image of deity or Buddha, such as that of the masters, yidams, Buddha, bodhisattva, dakini and guardian deities, etc; It is also dealt with the biography of Buddha, the history of the Buddhist sects, the monasteries, stupas, mandala, samsara, as well as the stories of the Tibetan original religion - Bon Religion. There are also a small part of thangkas depicting the less religious scenes, such as the calendar making, traditional Tibetan medicine, social life, folk customs and stories of personages. The saga-tellers in Lhasa and Xigaze used to hang up thangkas with religious or folk stories along the street, while pointing to the pictures while chanting. This is another function of thangka.

The thangka falls into several categories. That painted on paper or cloth is called painted thangka, which can be

further divided into colored, gold, red and black thangkas according to the background colors. That woven, embroidered or pasted on silk is called silk thangka. The process of making the pasted thangka is to cut the silk into various patterns, then paste them on silk or cloth, which is very popular in Tibetan



*Twelve-year Cycle (Painting)*

inhibited area in Qinghai Province and is one of three top arts together with the fresco and butter sculpture in the Kumbum Monastery in Qinghai. That curved on wooden plate then printed on cloth or paper is called block printed thangka, which can be also further divided into colored and black & white ones.

The thangka is cherished by the Tibetan people due to its themes and functions. The Buddha's image on the thangka is worshipped by the followers. In front of a Yidam or a Mandala thangka hung on a meditation room, the tantric monks observe it with meditation

to arrive at the realm of the yidam. When a family member passed away, the people would acquire a thangka and please the deity on the thangka to guide the soul of the dead for smooth incarnation. During the significant religious festivals, people usually hang up a huge thangka, which often shows the images of Shakyamuni, Maitreya or Amitabha casting their light on the sentient beings and freeing the beings from pains of desires. This event is called Buddha's Image Unfolding or Shinning. Thangkas about the calendar making or the traditional Tibetan medicine served as the textbooks in that time. Thangkas concerning history, customs and legendary provide people with knowledge and artistic entertainment. To many thangka lovers and researchers who are not necessarily religious believers, thangka helps them understand histories of religion, culture, society and fine arts and also provides best reference for them to make artistic creation.

The size, shape and theme of thangkas vary with their usages. The early thangka was said to be in a shape of squire and later on evolved into that of rectangular. The usual sizes used in monasteries and family altars alike are 50 cm (wide) X 75 cm (long), 65 cm X 90 cm, or 75 cm X 100 cm. The smallest is only 20 cm X 30 cm, called handy thangka. While the thangkas for unfolding or shinning are mostly pasted



ones with very large size, for example, during the Small Prayer Festival in the end of the second month of the last Tibetan calendar year, the size of the Amitabha thangka hung up outside of the Potala Palace is 55.8 m long X 46.8 m wide. Its area is 2611.4 sq. m and much larger than that of two basketball fields. This is probably the largest one in the world.

The exact historic record about the origin of the thangka has not yet been found out. However many Tibetologists like to quote the record in the Catalogue of the Jokhang Monastery written by the Fifth Dalai Lama and hold that the thangka had been existed in the reign of King Songtsan Gampo in the 7th century. The book says: "The King Songtsan Gampo used the blood from his nose to paint an image of the goddess White Lhamo. Later on when a statue of the White Lhamo was made, the painting was placed inside of the statue."

As one kind of Tibetan paintings, the inception and development of the thangka could certainly not be separated from the process of the Tibetan paintings as a whole. The relics of the Neolithic age unearthed from the Karub ruins in Qamdo and Qoigung Ruins in Lhasa proved that primitive arts had existed in Tibet as early as in four or five thousand years ago. A large number of ancient rock paintings discovered in different sites of Tibet in recent years, such as the Gyaling rock paintings by the Namco Lake in Nagqu and the

Wujiang rock paintings in Rutog County of Nagri, were made no later than the nomadic period before the Tubo period or the initial period of the Bon religion.

During the 7th century, the King Songtsan Gampo (617 - 650 AD.) married the Princess Wencheng of the Tang Dynasty and the Princess Bhrikuti Devi of Nepal.



*Akshobhya (Embroider)*

The two princesses brought in many sutras, technologies and a lot of builders and painters from Nepal and Chinese inland, thus greatly promoted the development of the Tibetan culture including paintings.

During the Tubo period, the Jokhang Monastery and the Ramoche Monastery in Lhasa and the Chanzhub Monastery, the Samye Monastery, the Geqoin Monastery and the Wuxiangduo Monastery in Shannan

Prefecture were built, so there might be great demand for the Buddhist images for the monks to observe and for the pilgrims to worship. Thus it is believable to say that the thangka emerged in this period of time. As the matter of fact, the Tibetan ancient history book, *Bashed*, recorded two interesting stories. The first one is that when the Samye Monastery was completed, a person named Gyatsan Magyan with a pot of pigments and a bunch of paint-brushes came and chanted: I am the best painter and sculptor, I would like to make Buddha's image for the king. The second is that when building up the Wuxiangduo Monastery, the king Tri Ralpachen (815 - 841 A.D.) invited an architect named Ligy Ribhujie from southern Xinjiang and the latter drew 108 samples on silks and submitted to the former. These records provide us some clues about the origination of the thangka. .

From the beginning of the latter prospect of the Tibetan Buddhism in the 10th century AD, various sects emerged successively and the religious believes were spread from higher class to the lower class, pushing forward the Buddhist culture and bring the thangka art into a new phase. In the period between 10th and 13th centuries, the thangka art was mainly influenced by the styles of the Southeast Asia and Chinese inland. While in the period between 14th and 15th centuries, many monasteries, such as the Gandain, Drepung, Sera, Tsahilhungpo, Palkor and Qambaling were built up



successively. The painting schools with enriched Tibetan features emerged and many masterpieces were made in this period.

The three major schools emerged in this period were: in the early 15th century, the Mentang School founded by Menla Teundrup in the region of Lhodrak; the Qinzi School founded by Qinzi Qinfo in the region of Gonggar; both of them being students of the master painter Dopa Tashi Gyelpo; and later on between the 16th and 17th centuries, the Gagzhi Schools represented by Langga Gagzhi, Qujie Gagzhi and Garma Gagzhi.

Generally speaking, the thangka art is a part of the traditional Tibetan culture named "the ten treatises", which can be divided into two groups, i.e. the five major and the five minor treatises of the Buddhist doctrine. The five major treatises include the technology, medicine, grammar, logic and philosophy. The thangka art belongs to the technology. Its painting should follow the requirement stipulated in some specific chapters concerning the painting and sculpturing in the Tripitaka in Tibetan language. The Master painters of all ages in Tibet, following the requirements, with creation and breaking-through, have established a unique style, creating many masterpieces.

In general, the Mentang School was noted for fine brushwork and mild hues and good at depicting the peaceful images of the deities and Buddha, such as Buddha, Masters and Bodhisattvas; while the Qinzi



*Time Wheel and Mandala*

School was featured for bold brushwork, striking color and skilled at depicting the wrathful deities and Buddha, such as Yidams, guardian deities and devils. These two schools were popular in U- Tsang Region, thus they were also collectively called U- Tsang School. While Gadri School was based on the Mentang School and highly influenced by the mountain and river paintings style in Chinese inland, it emphasized precision and lightness brushworks with light green color. It was prevalent in Kham Region and thus called Kham School.

The process of thangka making is as follows: prepare a piece of cotton cloth of suitable size then stretch it onto a wooden frame with rectangular shape. Then apply a thin layer of gesso on the cloth. And burnish it with a stone or conch shell to produce a smooth and lustrous surface. Draw

several baselines. Sketch with the graphite and outline with the black brush. Be sure to arrange the featured deity or Buddha in the center then draw various background patterns, such as the earth, water, fire, wind, flowers, trees, palace and bird and animals, etc; arrange the related deities or Buddha around the central figure, usually with yidams and Buddha on the top; the manifestation and bodhisattvas on the two sides; and the dakinis, guardians and god of wealth on the bottom.

Then apply pigments on the sketch. The quality of the pigments is essential to the thangka, which uses mainly the mineral pigments. The chemical pigments may not be used. The former can keep steadily for thousand years, while the latter maintains only for a few months. Outline again. Outline the eyes is the last but not the least process.

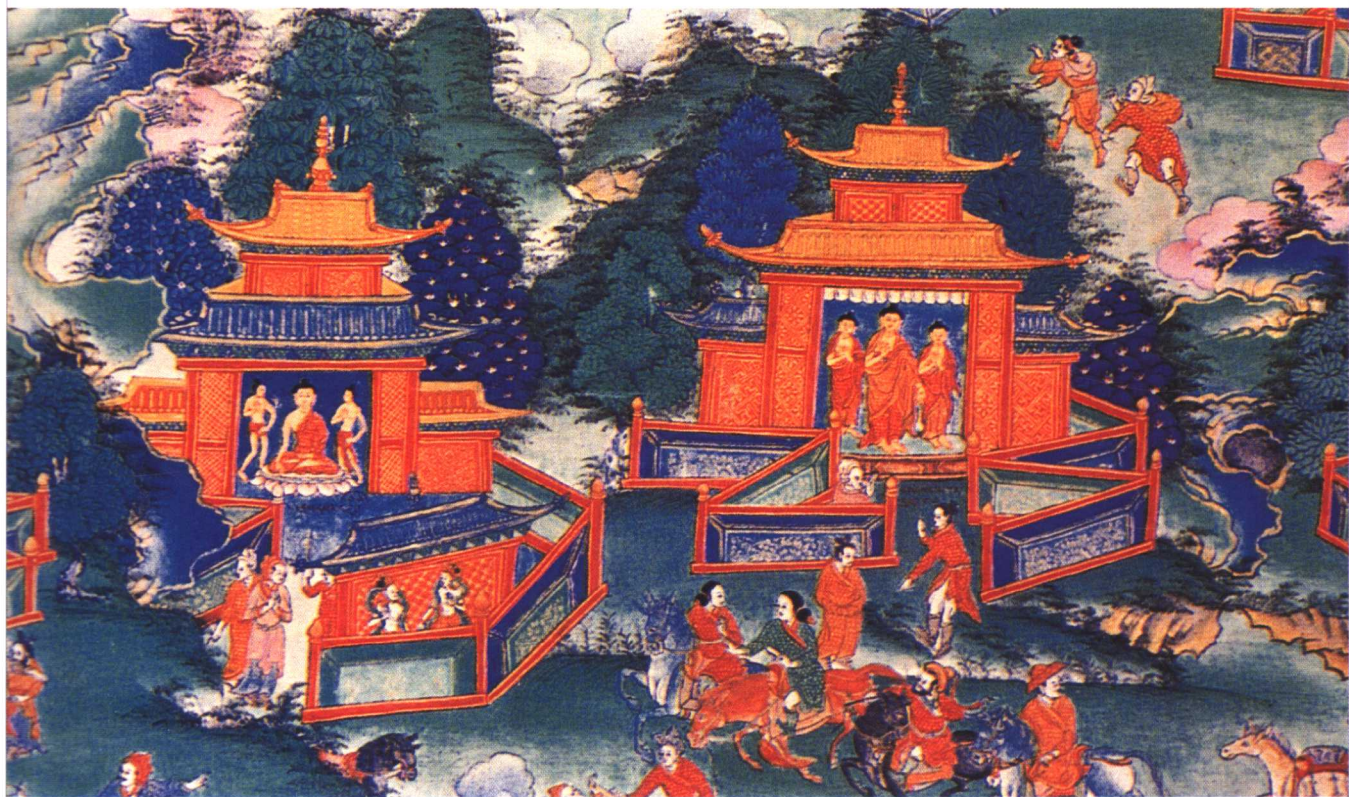
Remove the cloth from the frame and mounted on a piece of brocaded silk. Attach the wooden sticks to the top and bottom of the silk for storage and hanging up easily. All the thangka master painters are devoted Buddhist followers and on most occasions they would not sign and date their work, because that they make the thangka only for paying homage to the religion and deity. However they often please the master or living Buddha to print their red hand-print on it, or write the sutras and notes, which are significant evidence for us to identify or research the thangka.





*Buddha and His Disciples*





*Wedding of Princess Jincheng (Painting, Partial)*





*The Pasted Thangka (Embroider)*





*Green Tara (Partial)*



*Green Tara*





*Shakyamuni (Huge Pasted, Embroider, W75mXH55m)*



*Milar Rigba*





*Avalokitesvara at Rest (Embroider)*



*Avalokitesvara at Rest (Pasting)*



*God of Battle*





Mandala in the Xalhu Monastery





Tara (Partial)





*The Famous Tibetan Painter Yixi Shcherab is Painting the Image of Shakyamuni*



*Avalokitesvara (Pearl Decorated, Kept by the Qamchu Monastery)*



*A Senior Monk (Embroider)*





*Bull-headed Protector*



*Tara*

*Padmasambhava*







*Triad of the Abbot, the Master and the King (The Pasted, Embroider)*



*Dakini (Embroider)*



*Tunderbolt*