

TIBETAN THANGKAS

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THANGKAS

【ART】

【CULTURE】

【SPIRITUAL】

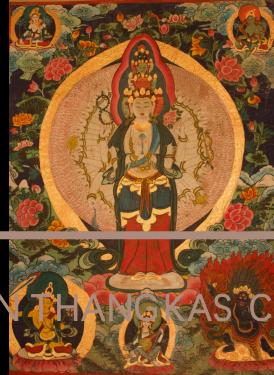


TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

THANGKAS

Thangka is a unique form of painting art in Tibetan culture. It is characterized by its distinct ethnic features, rich religious significance, and unique artistic style, using bright colors to depict the sacred world of the Buddha.

Traditionally, its pigments are made entirely from precious minerals and gems such as gold, silver, pearls, agate, coral, turquoise, malachite, and cinnabar, as well as plants like saffron, rhubarb, and indigo, symbolizing its sanctity. These natural materials ensure that the colors of Thangkas remain vivid and radiant, retaining their brilliance even after hundreds of years.



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

THANGKAS

Thangkas are regarded as treasures of Chinese ethnic painting art, often referred to as the "encyclopedia" of Tibetan culture. They are also a precious intangible cultural heritage within the folk art traditions of the Chinese nation.




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Chapter 1

Overview



OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Thangka (Thang-ga), also known as Tangga or Tanka, is a transliteration from Tibetan, referring to religious scroll paintings mounted with colorful silk brocade for hanging and worship.

Thangka is a unique form of painting art in Tibetan culture, with subjects spanning Tibetan history, politics, culture, and social life. Most surviving Thangkas are works of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon.



01 OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Traditional Thangka painting demands rigorous standards and an extremely complex process. It must be executed in strict accordance with the rituals described in scriptures and the instructions of spiritual teachers. This includes a series of procedures such as pre-painting rituals, preparing the canvas, drafting compositions, coloring and shading, outlining and finalizing details, applying gold and silver, opening the eyes of deities, and mounting and consecrating the finished work.

Creating a Thangka is time-intensive, taking at least six months for a simple piece, while more elaborate works can require over ten years to complete.



01 OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s



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OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s



As a result, Thangkas are regarded as treasures of Chinese ethnic painting art, often referred to as the "encyclopedia" of Tibetan culture, and are a precious intangible cultural heritage within the folk art traditions of the Chinese nation.

01 OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

A traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting on cotton, silk appliqué, or paper.

Typically depicting Buddhist deities, mandalas, or scenes from religious texts.

Used as teaching tools, meditative aids, and for religious rituals.



OVERVIEW OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Originated in Tibet around the 7th century.

Influences:

Indian, Chinese, and Nepalese artistic traditions.

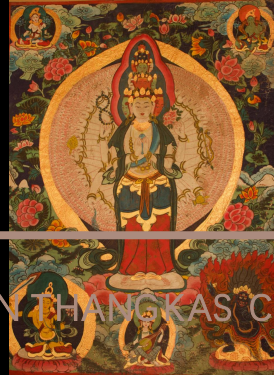
Role in Tibetan Buddhism:

Spread of teachings and preservation of sacred art forms.

Celestial Motion Diagram (90x65)

The diagram of celestial motion represents not only the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology but also hints at the origins of the Tibetan people



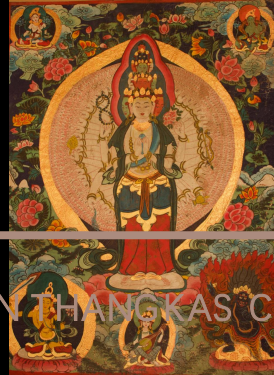


TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

ORIGIN OF THANGKA

The origin of Thangka is a subject of debate in academic circles, with four main viewpoints:

1. Thangka as a Painting Form Introduced from India with Buddhism: This perspective, proposed by Italian scholar Tucci, suggests that Thangka originated from the ancient Indian religious cloth painting called "Pata," which was brought to Tibet along with Buddhism.



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

ORIGIN OF THANGKA

2. Influence of Central Plains Painting: Proposed by Chinese scholar Xie Jisheng, this view argues that Thangka was influenced by painting styles from the Central Plains of China. In his article "The Origin of Thangka," he states: "The form of Thangka art itself does not originate from India. In fact, its development and evolution process align with the formation and evolution of Chinese scroll painting from the Han and Tang dynasties to the Song and Yuan dynasties. It originated in Dunhuang, a region with close interactions between Tibet and the Han, and evolved from Tibetan banner paintings along the trajectory of Buddhist art."



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

ORIGIN OF THANGKA

3. Account from the Fifth Dalai Lama's "The Crystal Mirror of Śākyamuni": According to this text, King Songtsen Gampo painted an image of the goddess Palden Lhamo using his own nosebleed. During the time of Tsangpa Warlordship, the Gushri Lama saw this image and used it as a sacred object, placing it inside a statue.

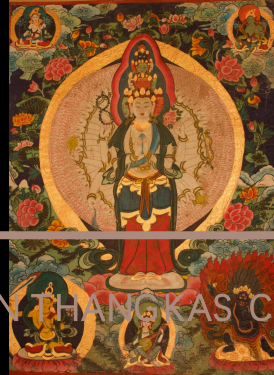
4. Development from the Indigenous Tibetan Bon Religion: This viewpoint suggests that Thangka evolved from the cloth paintings used by the Bon religion in Tibet. Bon monks utilized portable cloth paintings for preaching and spreading their teachings, which were later adopted and developed by Buddhism.



Chapter 2

Art Type





TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

ART TYPE

Thangka is often referred to as the "Encyclopedia of Tibetan Culture." Its themes are primarily religious but also encompass history, politics, economy, culture, folklore, secular life, architecture, medicine, astronomy, and calendrical calculations.



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

ART TYPE

The most common type is religious paintings, especially Buddha images. These Thangkas typically feature a central figure, with related figures, activities, or stories arranged around the main figure in a clockwise direction starting from the upper corners of the painting.

Each Thangka generally depicts a complete story, with the scenery and elements of the painting changing according to the storyline, unrestricted by historical, temporal, or spatial constraints. The figures in the painting are not bound by perspective, and the composition is balanced, rich, and varied.

ART TYPE OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Thangka was initially influenced by Nepalese styles. Around the 7th century, with the widespread introduction of Buddhism, there was a trend of building temples and monasteries throughout Tibet.

The murals and sculptures within these temples were created by artists and sculptors from Nepal and China. The works created by Nepalese and Tibetan artists from this period up to the 15th century are collectively referred to as the Nepalese school of painting.

Subsequently, there were the Qigang school during the time of Tsongkhapa; the Mentang and Qingze schools that emerged in the 15th century; and the Karma Gadri school that rose in the 16th century.



02 ART TYPE OF THANGKA

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

MATERIAL | TECHNIQUES

Cotton or silk as the base.

Natural mineral pigments for colors.

Gold and silver for embellishments.

Careful drafting and outlining.

Use of precise proportions and sacred geometry.





Chapter 3

Thangka Classification



03 THANGKA CLASSIFICATION

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

By Content:

- Buddha Thangkas
- Biography Thangkas
- Historical Thangkas
- Mythological Thangkas
- Doctrinal Thangkas
- Astronomical Thangkas
- Calendar Thangkas
- Tibetan Medicine Thangkas

Mandalas: Represent the universe in Buddhist cosmology.

Portraits: Depict lamas, deities, or historical figures.



03 THANGKA CLASSIFICATION

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

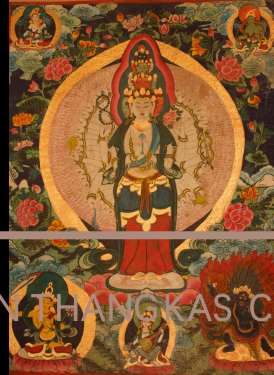
By Size:

- Large Thangkas
- Standard Thangkas
- Small Thangkas

By Material:

- Painted Thangkas: Hand-painted on fabric.
- Embroidered Thangkas: Made with stitched fabrics and embroidery.
- Brocade Thangkas: Created using woven brocade techniques.



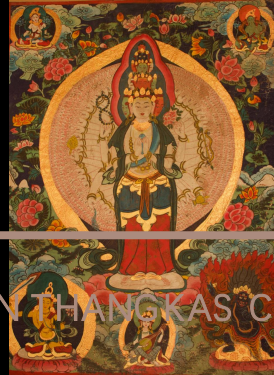


TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

PAINTING SUBJECTS

Generally,
they can be
divided into
religious
and non-
religious
categories.

- RELIGIOUS : Mandalas, Jataka Tales, Assembly of Trees, Portraits of Masters, Biographies of Lives, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Main Deities and Protectors, Dakinis, Arhats, Wheel of Life (Samsara), Western Pure Land, etc.
- NON-RELIGIOUS : History, Mythological Stories, Astronomy and Calendar, Tibetan Medicine, etc.



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

PAINTING SUBJECTS

Generally,
they can be
divided into
religious
and non-
religious
categories.

The most common type is religious painting—Buddha images. In this type of Thangka, the central position typically depicts the main figure.

Starting from the corners of the image, figures, places of activity, or stories related to the central figure are arranged in a clockwise direction around the center.

Each Thangka generally depicts a complete story, and the elements in the scene change according to the needs of the narrative, unconstrained by history, time, or space. The figures in the scene are also unaffected by the perspective of distance, and the composition is balanced, full, and dynamic.



Chapter 4

Value and Significance



04 VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Historical Value

Some thangkas are based on historical facts, focusing on significant political events and activities in history.

For example, there are historical themes depicting the life and achievements of King Songtsen Gampo. Among them, works that celebrate the friendship between the Tibetan and Han peoples, such as the story of Princess Wencheng's marriage to Tibet, are often displayed in prominent places in temples.



04 VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Historical Value

The artwork portrays scenes such as the Tang emperor's proposal, the five difficulties of the marriage, and the princess's journey to Tibet, illustrating the historical event of the Tang-Tibetan marriage in the 15th year of the Zhenguan reign.





TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

VALUE & SIGNIFICANCE

Religious Value:

The origin and development of thangka art are closely linked to Tibetan Buddhism. The rise and development of this artistic form coincided with the introduction of Indian Buddhism to Tibet. At that time, the nomadic lifestyle was still the primary mode of production in many regions of Tibet, and fixed temples could not meet the religious needs of many migrating and unsettled followers.



TIBETAN THANGKAS CULTURE

VALUE & SIGNIFICANCE

Religious Value:

Thus, thangkas, which primarily appeared in the form of scroll paintings, met the religious needs of the followers and became objects of worship that they could carry with them. As a result, thangka painting flourished and developed.

Thangkas are used in monasteries, homes, and altars, and during festivals like Losar (Tibetan New Year). They aid in meditation and worship by helping individuals focus on teachings and spiritual goals.

VALUE AND SIGNIFICANCE

T i b e t a n T h a n g k a s

Preserving Heritage:

Efforts to keep the tradition alive through workshops and schools.

Global Appeal:

Appreciated worldwide for aesthetic and cultural value.



CHALLENGES

Modernization and Loss of Traditions:

Younger generations losing touch with the art form.

Counterfeit Artworks:

Mass production diminishing authenticity.

Preservation Needs:

Fragility of materials and restoration challenges.



TIBETAN
THANGKAS

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