

THANGKA PAINTING



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Documented by Saumya Rawat and Anwita Kapoor (IICD, Rajasthan) for



Introduction

A *Thangka* is a Tibetan scroll-banner painting which is hung in a monastery or a family altar and carried by lamas in ceremonial processions. *Thangka* is a unique art form that belongs to Tibetan culture. In Tibetan the word '*than*' means Flat and the suffix '*ka*' stands for Painting. The *Thangka* is thus a kind of painting done on flat surface but which can be rolled up when not required for display. The most common shape of a Thangka is the upright rectangular form.

Thangka is a different art in terms of its connection to Buddhism. Its roots can be found in the Buddhist scriptures. *Thangkas* are used by the Tibetan Practitioners to help them develop a close relationship with a meditational deity. *Thangkas* assist the mediator in focusing and clearly visualizing particular images.

The making of thangka involves many complicated processes and there are certain prerequisites and stringent requirements to adhere to as it is viewed as a religious object for religious purposes.

Global Presence

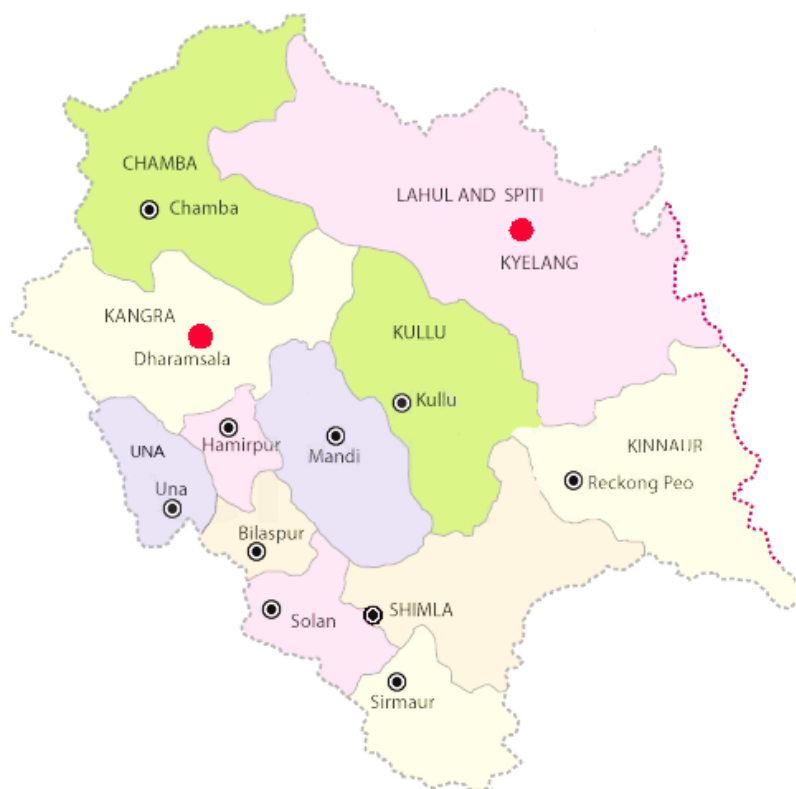
Tibetan Buddhist painting developed from the traditions of early Buddhist paintings, like paintings in Ajanta Caves in India and the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang on the Silk Road, in Gansu province, China, which have elaborate wall paintings. The *Thangka* form developed alongside the tradition of Tibetan Buddhist wall paintings, which are or were mostly in monasteries. The earliest survivals of Tibetan paintings on cloth are in some pieces from the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang in China. Earlier *Thangka* forms of paintings were made in ancient scriptures and manuscripts and textiles.

Over the following centuries Tibetan paintings, both on walls and *Thangka*, continued to develop in its distinctive style, balancing between the two major influences of Indo-Nepalese and Chinese painting. Styles vary considerably between the different regions of Tibet as well as the wider region where *Thangkas* are painted. Within Tibet the regions nearer Nepal and China are often more influenced by those styles. Bhutanese *Thangka* were mainly influenced by Central Tibet. The different monastic orders also developed somewhat different stylistic characters.

Thangkas were painted in all the areas where Tibetan Buddhism flourished, which include Mongolia, Ladakh, Sikkim, and other parts of Himalayan India in Arunachal Pradesh, Dharamsala, and Lahaul and Spiti district in Himachal Pradesh. It is also practiced in parts of Russia (Kalmykia, Buryatia, and Tuva) and Northeast China.

Geographical region

Thangka painting is being practiced in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and in Lahaul and Spiti, and Kangra districts of Himachal Pradesh in India. In Dharamshala, Thangka painting is being practiced by Tibetans in exile.



● Areas in Himachal Pradesh where *Thangka* Painting is practiced

Practitioner Community

Thangka painting is practiced by artists who go through years of training and practice. The art of *Thangka* Painting is not gender bound, anyone who is willing to dedicate themselves to learning this art can practice thangka. *Thangka* earlier was seen as a meditation, a means of communication between the artist and the deity.

The person who wants to learn the art of painting a *thangka* gets empowerment by the lamas, and then under the guidance of the master thangka artist as his guru, learns and practices

thangka for years. A *thangka* artist also needs to have a thorough knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. *Thangka* has very strict and set rules which are written in the Buddhist scriptures, thus a thorough knowing of the iconography and meanings stated in the scriptures is a must.

A *Thangka* artist learns to sketch Buddhist symbols and figures of deities for initial few years. The whole process of perfecting the art of *Thangka* takes years with the learning process itself taking up to twelve years.

Thangkas are painted whole year round. Though being practiced indoors, the paintings require dry atmosphere. Sunlight is only required during the preparation of canvas for its good and fast drying. Therefore many a times several canvases are prepared in advance during good sunlight and dry weather.

In Dharamshala, *Thangka* painting is practiced by the Tibetan community in exile. Dharamshala is the centre of the Tibetan exile world in India. Following the 1959 Tibetan uprising there was an influx of Tibetan refugees who followed the 14th Dalai Lama. Thus, Dharamshala has communities of Tibetans, amongst whom a few try to preserve their culture and art by learning and practicing them in institutes like Norbulingka Institute.

Materials

Varieties of tools and raw materials are used for making this traditional art.

1. Cotton cloth
2. Thread (for fastening the canvas to the frame)
3. Mineral colors-

Carbon Black (Tib: *nagtsa*): Black

Cinnabar (Tib: *chog lama*): vermillion color

Lapis Lazuli: Blue

Lac Red (Tib: *gyatso*)

Malachite Green (Tib: *pangma*): Green color

Minium Orange (Tib: *litri*): Orange color

Orpiment Yellow (Tib: *ba la*): Yellow color

Yellow and Red Ochre (Tib: *ngang pa* and *tsag*)

Gold (Tib: *ser*) - powdered gold, stored as drops

Silver (Tib: *ngul dul*) - Powdered silver, also stored as drops



Mineral colors are brought in from different places within India as well as Nepal and Tibet. Cold gold or *Ser* and Cold silver or *ngul dul* are brought from Nepal in form of small drops.



4. Leather Glue



5. Distemper Powder



6. Silk Brocade cloth (for mounting the final painting, from Varanasi)

Tools

1. Wooden frame
2. Pencils
3. Compass
4. Scale
5. Brushes (of different sizes)



Wooden Frame



Brushes used for painting

Process

The process of making the painting involves three steps; preparation of the canvas, drawing and coloring/painting.

Preparation of Canvas:

1. The canvas is stretched over a wooden frame and the sides are sewn to the frame with a cord that allows tension to be adjusted.



2. Leather glue is heated in water till it melts.



3. This melted glue is mixed with distemper powder and water to form a liquid paste.



4. This paste is applied properly on both sides of the canvas and let to dry in the sunlight.

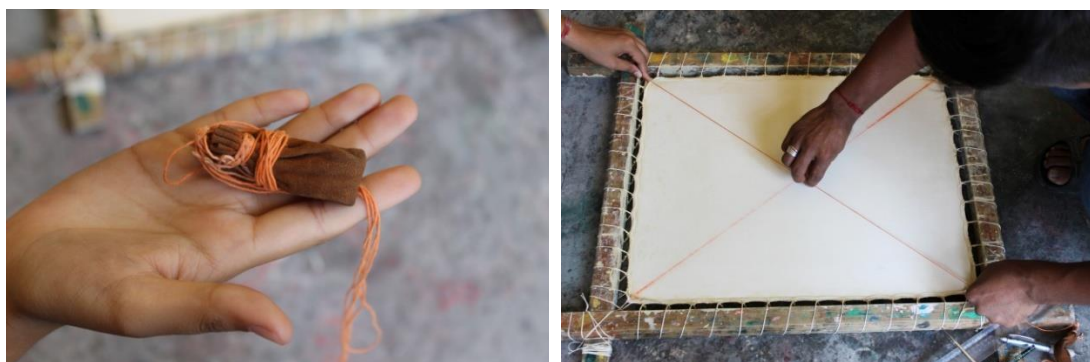


5. The surface of the canvas is then polished with a smooth stone or rim of a glass tumbler, until the underlying texture of the canvas is no longer apparent, i.e. the distemper and glue paste is no longer on the surface and all the pores of the canvas are filled.



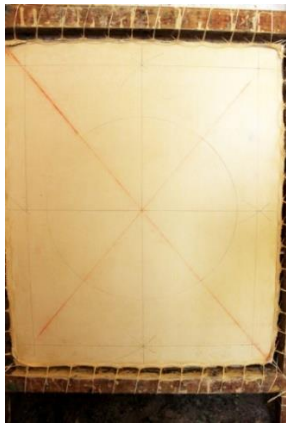
Drawing:

1. Using pencil, compass and a scale, geometric markings are made on the backside of the canvas to define points for the drawing on the front side.



The artist uses a thread dipped in color to find the centre point of the canvas to start the measurements.

The colored thread is stretched along the diagonals of the canvas and pinched which forms a line of color on the canvas.



Once the centre point of the canvas is located, a circle is drawn on the centre, and arcs are cut on it to segment its circumference. The points on which the arcs cut on the circumference are used to divide the canvas into half and to mark points for the border.

2. It requires perfect skills in drawing, perfect figures and great understanding of the econometric principles to make this paintings. Balanced grid of angles and intersecting lines are used to portray arms, legs, eyes, nostrils, ears, and various ritual implements, thus for paintings these geometrically balanced drawings are first made on different paper and through tracing paper it is transferred to the prepared canvas.



3. Once the initial sketch is over, the design is redrawn and details refined with ink.

Coloring/painting:

1. Mineral color powder is then mixed with glue binder to form a paste of required consistency.
2. The drawing is then colored. First the distant areas are colored like sky and background, and then the main figure is colored.



Pictures showing background sky and ground being coloured first.

The completed painting is taken to only the tailors who mount the work on silk brocade to complete the scroll painting of Tibetan *Thangka*.

Themes, Motifs and Iconography

Thangka painting follows old iconographic patterns that are defined in detail in old Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. A *Thangka* is made according to strict rules of Tibetan Buddhist iconography with rare attempts of modification in the figure drawing. Artistic freedom of a *Thangka* artist is however limited to background landscape and slight color variations.

The main themes of a *Thangka* Paintings are:

Mandalas

A *mandala* *Thangka* follows a cosmic, geometric pattern of circles, geometric pattern of squares and circles. The outer square form has four gates. These four doors symbolize the bringing together of the four boundless thoughts namely - loving kindness, compassion, sympathy, and equanimity. It is considered to represent the abode of the deity. At the center of the mandala lies the deity, with whom the mandala is identified. It is the power of this deity that the *mandala* is said to be invested with. The *mandala* is "a support for the meditating person".



A mandala

Buddha's Life

Thangkas depicting Buddha's life are simple and present the story of Buddha Sakyamuni from the time his mother saw a white elephant in her dream before conceiving him, to Buddha attaining nirvana.



A thangka showing Buddha's life

Wheel of life

The Wheel of life or the wheel of existence or *Bhavachakra* is a frequently seen theme of Tibetan *Thangka*. A dreadful monster or *Yama* holds a wheel in his claws. The wheel has a number of small circles and is divided into 6 different realms.



Wheel of life

6 realms in Buddhism are:

- Heaven
- The realm of humanity
- The realm of angry gods (*Asuras*)
- The realm of hungry ghosts (*Preta*)
- Animal realm
- Hell

Buddhas and peaceful deities

Thangkas depicting images of forms of Buddha and other peaceful deities like Green and white Tara, Manjushree, Alokitesvara, etc.



Avlokiteshwara

Wrathful Deities

Thangkas depicting wrathful deities like Mahakala, Yamantaka, and Vajrapani.



Yamantaka

Sometimes different colored canvases are used to paint the *thangkas*. In these *thangkas* figures are not colored much; the paintings are mostly outlines with not much color and often with gold or silver highlights. A particular color canvas is associated with a particular deity.

White: normal colored paintings

Brown: *Amitava Buddha*

Blue: *Medicine Buddha*

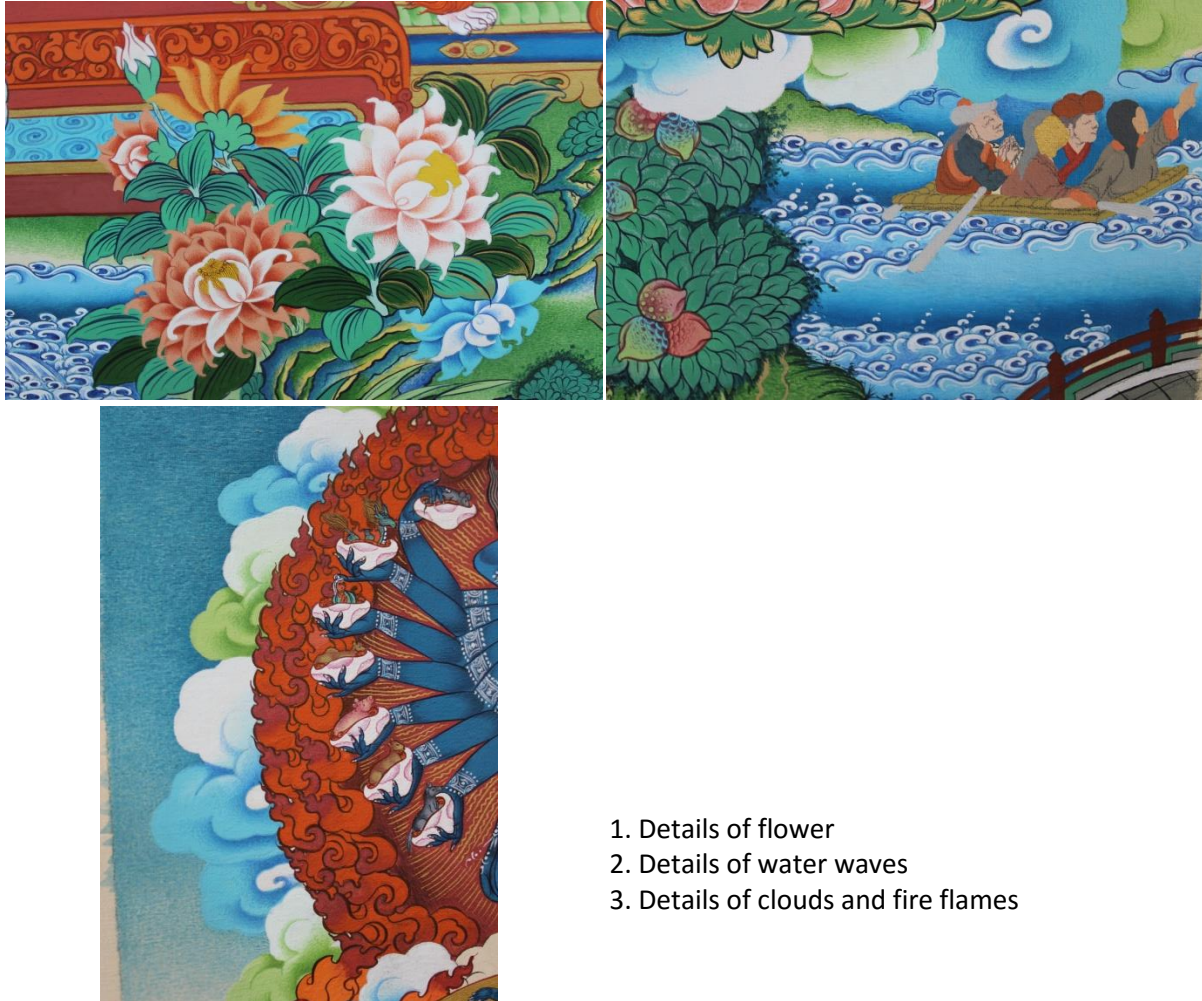
Red: *Guru Padmasambhava*

Green: *Green Tara*

Reddish Brown: *Manjushree*



Different colored canvases. For coloring the canvases, powdered mineral pigments are mixed with distemper and glue and applied on the canvases.



1. Details of flower
2. Details of water waves
3. Details of clouds and fire flames

There are six styles in *Thangka* paintings and each style has its own significance:

- **Minti style:** More importance is given to the use of blue and green colors.
- **Chanti style:** Light colors or pastel colors are used more.
- **Kamgatti style:** Sketch based painting
- **China getti style:** Painting through cosmic design
- **Gotti style:** Floral designs are made without making the outline floral
- **Khamtti style:** Paintings are made using the place name as base

It depends on the artist that which style he practices, in which style the painting would be made.

A *Thangka* painting is never signed by the artist. The reason lies in the fact that an artist paints a *thangka* not as his work of art but for the religious reasons. For an artist painting a *thangka* for another person is a form of good karma. However once a *thangka* painting is finished, the artist writes a mantra “*OM AH HUM*” vertically on the backside of the canvas.

The mantra is written right behind the body of the deity: **OM** being behind the forehead

AH at the throat

HUM at the chest



OM is the essence of form, *AH* the essence of sound and *HUM* the essence of mind. *OM* purifies all perception; *AH* all sounds and *HUM* the mind, its thoughts and emotions.

Products

Thangka scrolls still remain the most popular product being made with this technique. However there are a few variations available in the market like painted furniture. One can find wall paintings in Buddhist temples, which are closely associated with the art *thangka* painting since time immemorial.

As mentioned earlier, *thangka* paintings are done with strict set of rules which are predefined, thus there is a very less scope of experimentation and innovation. One aspect which differentiates *thangka* from other crafts and art practices is that *thangkas* were not for aesthetic or daily utilitarian purposes, *thangkas* instead are an aid for meditation or a symbol of good karma. This is why a large amount of *thangkas* being made are still commissioned. In past, commissioning of *thangka* would build a spiritual relation between the person who has

commissioned a *thangka*, the artist, the lama (under whose guidance the artist works) and the deity.

The contents of the *thangka* are according to the customers' demand. One small but quite notable change that has occurred is that a few *thangka* paintings now are not being mounted on the silk brocade cloth, instead are framed with wood and glass. Such *thangkas* are for commercial purposes.

Thangka Appliqué or Dras-drub-ma

Another kind of *Thangka* is in the form of appliqué work. Appliqué *thangka* is a scroll-like installation on which Buddhist imagery is constructed by stitching colored pieces of fabric onto a base cloth. Various parts of the image are produced separately by cutting and sealing their ends and then are finally attached onto a single cloth to form a whole figure. The parts maybe overlapped and arranged so there is an addition of a different degree of dimension in the *thangka*. The details are made on these cloth pieces by embroidery which gives the whole image a definition. The threads for embroidery are made with a hair of horse's tail coiled with silk thread.

Innovations

Innovations and changes in *thangka* painting have been made only in terms of tools and materials and otherwise the practice and process is same as it was years back. Along with pigment colors, acrylic colors and poster colors are also used. With the help of blow dryers and room heaters, ideal situations are created during unlikely weather for paintings to be painted efficiently. This helps the artist to paint *thangkas* all year round.

Challenges

Thangka paintings have admirers all over the world, be it for its aesthetic beauty or for spiritual purposes. A lot of *thangkas* are being commissioned from all over the world, and several are bought through various online portals which sell authentic paintings. Because *thangka* paintings have large amount of admirers, there are printed versions of *thangkas* available in the market which are bought by people all over the world. These *thangkas* lack authenticity. Also a lot people are aware about the existence of the art but not well aware about its making process like many other arts and crafts. Thus, the tremendous effort going into making of *thangkas* get

unnoticed. Thangkas are not being portrayed as a commercial art, and that is where its beauty lies in, the relationship between a *thangka* and its painter is deep and spiritual. The story of *thangka* paintings need to be told and thus, awareness is the important challenge that *thangka* art is facing.

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'Norbulingka thangka's Norbulingka Institute - Tibetan Thangka Paintings from the Tibetan Government's Institute under the Chairmanship of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. < <http://www.norbulingka.org>>

Annexure

ARTISAN PROFILE FORM

Name of Contact Person met:

Name of the Artisan	Youten Dorjee		
Address	Norbulingka Institute PO Sidhpur Dharamshala, Dist. Kangra Himachal Pradesh		
Mobile No/ Phone No	+918679173443		
Profile of the artisan	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Master Artisan <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Artisan		
DCH Artisan Card no			
Has the Artisan won any award? Please mention	No		
Crafts practiced by the artisan	1. Thangka Painting and Mandala Drawing		
	2.		
	3.		
	4.		
Since when is the artisan practicing the craft (or for how many years)	Since 1995 till now (20 years)		
Number of Production Units (e.g.: no of workshops/ no of looms, etc)			
Region of Work	Sidhpur, Dharamshala		
Number of artisans / craft workers engaged		Full-time	Part-time
	Male		
	Female		
Are family members involved in the craft?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No Yes, Relative- Aunt		
Estimate of Sales	Monthly:		
	Annually:		
Products produced	1.		
	2.		
	3.		
	4.		

	5.
	6.
	7.
Production capacity(e.g: no of pieces/ products produced in a month, no of people engaged in producing a piece/ product)	
What are the production related challenges they face	1. Difficulty in Raw material procurement
	2. High production cost
	3. Frequent inability to meet orders
	4. Rejection of Orders. Provide reason:
	5. Inability to meet quality standards/ quality issues
	6. Others:
Major marketing channels	1.Exhibitions
	2.Retail Stores:
	3.Wholesale buyers:
	4.Online Online Store of the institute
	5.Export:
	6.Others: Paintings are commissioned
What are the challenges that they face in selling their products	1. Threat from machine made goods
	2. Lack of information on exhibitions
	3. No link to buyers
	4. Any other?
What are their needs?(e.g: skill, design, market, working capital, organization development, etc)	
Does the craftmark programme sound interesting to them?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Any suggestions by the artisan?	

Name of Data Collector: [Saumya Rawat](#)

Date: 05.06.2015

Phone no: +918384994071

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