

Buddhist Motifs in Tibetan Thangkas

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The origin of Vajrayana Buddhism is traced back to the inhospitable mountain ranges of Tibet inhabited by farmers, nomadic tribes, traders, and herdsman who faced perils in their routine life as a part of their struggle to exist. Taken over from the preceding Bon religion, Vajrayana retained the essence of magic, mysticism, omnipotent spirits, folklore, and the religious practices associated with it.

Thus Buddhism was introduced in Tibet during 7th century. The tantric Buddhism was patronized by King Trisong Detsen. Later, Guru Padmasambhava referred to as Guru Rinpoche was instrumental in spreading the tenets of Vajrayana Buddhism in the Himalayan region of India and Tibet.

Hindu religious iconography is characterized by religious recitations, hymns, prayers that are documented as stotras. These are description of a God or deity in the diverse iconographic disposition. In absence of such vivid recitations in Vajrayana Buddhism, iconographic description depended on visual memory and monastic learning.

Tantric Iconography in thangkas

Vajrayana Buddhism had the right milieu of iconography which satisfied social need for super natural mysticism and monastic practices. To a commoner it was a means to drive off evil spirits and bring good luck and at monastic level, a medium of meditation. Thangkas presenting Buddha, Gurus, Yantras, Mandalas, purported to bring good luck and all virtues of health, prosperity, wisdom, longevity, and peace.

The art and iconography in thangkas has a universal appeal to the common household as well as monks and monasteries. The commoner look up on the religious imagery for safeguarding the home, purifying village, protecting the crops and animals, curing the sick, and guiding the souls of ancestors to safety. At shrines it is apart of monastic practices.

Thangkas are colorful pictorial representation of religious iconography, fables, and philosophy. The pictorial presentations helped them gain popularity among masses during its introduction in around 8th century. These thangkas were painted on fabric which could be rolled. Such portability helped Buddhist monks carry them from one place to other while propagating religion. Thangkas as medium of propagation of ideology, spread from Nepal to Tibet and then to far off places like Mongolia.

The Tibetan Thangka paintings of 8th century are called Gadri style paintings. These are the adaptations of Chinese art form to Buddhist paintings. Later in 9th century another style of Tibetan Thangka painting, Menri was introduced in Tibet from Nepal. Gadri style is found in the Eastern part of Tibet, whereas Menri is found in Central and Western Tibet. During 15th century, artists revived Gadri style of painting with enhanced intricate designs and vivid colors. Presently, the Gadri style of painting is widely practiced.

The Buddhist pantheon in Vajrayana School enriched thangkas by introducing various themes. Thangkas are made on themes like Buddha and his representations, Gurus, Mandalas representing religious philosophy, preachings, yidam, and yantras.

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Thangkas occupied a prominent role in displaying the art and iconography in vivid colors adopting images which presented human figures, animal figures, combinations, and various colors, each with a characteristic interpretation.

Directional properties of deities

Thangkas represented various forms Buddhist pantheon like Vairocana (Dhayani Buddha), Medicine Buddha, Avalokiteshwara, Tara, Manjushri, and Bhaisajyaguru, Thousand Buddha, thirty five Buddhas of confession, and Maitreya Bodhisattva. The lineage of Gurus includes Padmasambhava (Rinpoche), Dipankara, and masters of various sects of tantricism.

The older sect Niyagmpa dates back to the advent of Padmasambhava (Rinpoche), in the second half of 8th century. The Kargyu traces their origin to an Indian saint called Naropa (1040) whose disciple Marpa (1012- 1096) founded this sect with esoteric teachings. The cult practices so developed are passed to succeeding gurus.

Sakya sect was founded in 11th century by scholar Khongyal and Sakya monastery was established in 1071. The Gelug sect started in 14th century by monk scholar named Tsong-Khapa. They were generally referred to as Red Hat and Yellow Hats, respectively. There were some differences in terms of esoteric practices and monastic discipline between these schools of thought, but they complemented each other. The yellow sect Gelugs became popular in 16th century in Tibet and Mongolia.

During the same period, Avalokiteshwara (Chenrezi) was the head of the Mahayana Pantheon when Mahayana migrated to Tibet. Avalokiteshwara is worshiped all over the Himalayan region. Later, in the same lineage, Dalai Lama is acclaimed to be the contemporary form (Nirmanakaya) of Avalokiteshwara.

Thematics in thangkas

In the vajrayana iconography, visualization of Buddha in five forms is called Dhyani Buddha. Buddha images are created with Vairocana at the center and Amitabha (Yodpame) in West, Akshobhya (Mitrugpa) in East, Amoghasidhi (Donyen Dondrup) in North, and Ratnasambhava (Rinchen Jungney) in South.

Similarly, Dharmapalas, the fierce deities that ward off evil were also conceived with respect to directions. Accordingly, Vajrayana conceived Kuvera (Namthöse) of North, Dhritarashtra (Yulkorsung) of East, Virudhka (Phagchepo) of South, and Virupaksha (Chenmigzang) of West. To make pictorial representation more vivid, these deities are associated with color and characteristics. The fierce deities are associated with non human forms making them aggressive as protectors.

Colors in general, were associated with certain properties. The prayer flags had a characteristic description of colors. White (Zhiwa) represents, benign nature, Yellow (Gyapa), shows magnanimity, red (Wangthang) marks luck, green (Dragpo) denotes wrathfulness and blue (TsaLa NumSum) symbolizes longevity.

In Buddhist tantric practices, visualization precedes and succeeds sunyata. Sunyata is a state of nothingness. Such sunyata is considered *the Black hole* of all malice. Thangkas help in the process of visualization. The practitioner has the choice of deity to identify the energies that

are contemplated. This is the origin of Yidam, which is again pictorial representation of a choice deity.

For a common devout, *Yidam* is an important element of thematic thangkas, representing choice deities, fighting evil spirits, keeping calamity aloof. At the same time the Yidam had a significant role in monastic practices of monks at advanced levels of tantricism.

Yidam allows selection of one's own deity as protector. These protecting deities are Mahakala, Samantabhadra, Heruka, Yamantaka, Hayagreeva, Kalachakra, Kurukulla, and four directional deities. Yidams play an important role in tantric initiation and practices.

As a unique distinction the deities are visualized with their consorts. At advanced levels, the source of energy, creation, and emancipation is associated with pictorial visualization in tantric practices. For these reasons of tantric significance, the paintings of Yidam at shrines are concealed under curtains out of sight of novice visitors.

Mandalas are pictorial representations of Buddhist philosophy. Pictorial representation appeals to all sections of the society as they have the freedom and flexibility of interpretation. Mandalas are figures of geometric symmetry presented in terms of squares and circles. The structure of mandala comprises a central picture with peripheral walls and gates. In tantric Buddhism mandala deals with body, speech, and mind. The body denotes images; speech implies mantras and the mind are represented by mandala.

Medicine Buddha Thangkas reflect art in science. The Tibetan school of medicine is reflected in Thangkas. The range of Thangkas include, Sakyamuni as Baisajyaguru, human anatomy, disease and diagnosis, embryology, medical instruments, herbal medicine as materia medica, and disease management. The comprehensive Tibetan medicine is represented in the form of Thangkas.

These paintings on the walls of the shrine and on the fabric as thangkas are mere intricate designs, images and items of artistic overtures for a casual visitor, but for the avid, it encompasses mythical world of art, culture, religion, and life.

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