

Title of the paper: 'Buddhist Art and Iconography: Array of themes in Thangkas'

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### **Abstract**

*Art and iconography has become an integral part of Vajrayana religion and culture. Thangkas, reflecting art and iconography in Buddhist realm, are significant in their pictorial representations.*

*The paper attempts to describe, each theme of Thangka and its interpretation of colors and life forms. Some Thangkas show wrathful deities with specific color and character. Few other Thangkas display human forms, animal faces, designs. Certain Thangkas differentiate between peaceful, semi- peaceful and wrathful faces.*

*Thangkas exhibit anthromorphic, theriomorphic,, and chrematomorphic iconography by way of human forms, animal forms, objects and symbols, respectively. These are presented in three dimensional images with rich colors and designs.*

*Certain Thangkas are specially designed for meditative purposes. Each form has a physical description and a spiritual interpretation. In building the spiritual imagery, a thangka incorporates different colors, directions, forms and traits. It is imperative to have visualization as a part of Tantric practices at advanced levels. Visualization is considered essential while practicing 'sunnyta' (nothingness).*

*Mandalas are purported to have effects on the meditative state of mind. The geometric forms with grids, walls, and gates provide visual aid to meditation. Yantra, with Tantric inscriptions help in welcoming the desirable and warding off the undesirable.*

*The paper attempts to bring out the descriptive and interpretative aspects of Thangkas.*

### **Full Paper**

## **'Buddhist Art and Iconography: Array of themes in Thangkas'**

In Buddhist art and architecture, chromatomorphic iconography existed ever since aniconic period in the form of religious symbols, object and insignia. The theriomorphic iconography representing animal forms is also found along side, proving rich disposition of cultural overtures.

In the evolution to anthropomorphic iconography, human forms were presented symbolically. In the Buddhist art and architecture, iconic period marks the advent of Gandhar School where Sakyamuni takes the human form. Together with this, elaborate ornamentation followed, evolving to Mathura and Amaravati schools.

The Tibetan art has added color to iconic richness. The imagery now develops depth and wins common acceptance. Such colorful representation of Vajrayanist Gods and deities can only be compared with Hindu pantheon. This visual art and culture, remains shrouded in mysticism in absence of easily available iconic interpretation. However the visual appeal earns the acceptance and trust of the common man. This is the essence of art and iconography hidden in the Tibetan Thangkas.

In the etymological sense, Thangka is derived from two syllables, *tthan* meaning flat and the *ka*, a painting. Thangka is a painting made on a flat stratum. Thankas are traditionally, paintings on silk scrolls that could be rolled up. Thankas are also painted on the walls of shrines.

*Thangka*, symbolically, is the synthesis of compassion and wisdom, wherein compassion epitomizes male deity and wisdom, the female. The Thangkas that are used for special occasions are called as *naimitikka* and those that are offered to the gurus are called as *naivedika*.

### **Structure and composition of Thangkas**

Thangkas can be seen narrating an episode, miracle, preaching or depicting monastic life. Such thangkas may involve a legendary character or a historical incident. There are deductive paintings indicating religious philosophy, fables and morals. Thangkas depicting astrological diagrams are significant in driving off evil spirits and bringing in good luck.

The Vajrayana pantheon has an array of themes to represent Gods and deities, some of those with variation of peaceful or wrathful, singular or with consorts. While portraying Gods and deities there is a particular hierarchy in which the images are depicted. The hierarchy is specific in terms of size of the figure and also the placing in the frame of a larger picture.

Where Gods are visualized, the painting follows a level of hierarchy of figures. The main figure (*gts bo*) occupies central position where as the guests (*lha magron*) are placed on the periphery. The pictures are painted as per the iconographic classes. The iconographic classes indicate ranks, where the main figure is at the center and its hierarchy is shown by the size.

The hierarchy of images in descending order follow - Masters, Tantric deities, Buddha in *sambhogakaya*, Bodhisattva, Female bodhisattva, *Pratyeka* Buddha- *Sravakas*, *Dhakini*, *Dharmapalas*, Wrathful protector - Vajrapani, *Yaksha* - guardians of direction, Wealth giving deities, and Lesser deities like *mahanaga*.

### **Dhyanis Buddhas**

Among various themes of Thangkas the most popular theme is that of Sakyamuni (Buddha). In the Vajrayana School, Dhyanis Buddhas is a dominant theme. This pentad of Buddha is traced

back to 750 B.C. In this theme the four deities are guardians, one of each cardinal directions and the central positing is held by the quintessential Buddha.

In iconographic features, Dhyanī Buddhas are associated with their attending *bohisatvas*. *Ratnasambhava* is grouped with *Samanta-badhra*, *Akasha-garbha*; *Amithaba* is shown with *Avolo-kiteshvara*, *Manjushri*; *Amogasiddhi* is accompanied by *Vajrapani*, *Sarva-nivarana-visha-khambini*; and *Akshobya* is visualized with *Maitreya*, *Kshiti-garbha*.

*Vjrapani* has two identifications: the peaceful Buddha based on compassion and wisdom and the wrathful, surrounded by flames of wisdom and snakes of anger held in check.



Vajrasttva



Vajrapani

### **Dharmapalas**

Dharmapalas are the guardians of teaching. *Dharmapalas* are fierce deities because of their regulatory role in enforcing tantric discipline. The main role of the *mahakalas* is to perform four karmas: pacifying, enriching, magnetizing and destroying obstacles in the tantric practice.

*Dharmapalas* are shown in dark colors including black with animal heads and appendages. These are adorned with bone and jewels, armed and having several lesser deities around them. They ride animals and may be visualized with multiple arms. There can be distinction between male *mahakala* and female *mahakali*.

Directional deities are assigned colors, characters, wearing armor, weapons, pennons, banners, gems in a gold dish, and lassos with variations between regions and countries. These directional deities are visually distinguishable in terms of colors ornamentations and specific objects.

### **Mandalas**

In tantric Buddhism, the physical entity encompasses three aspects : body, speech and mind. These three are symbolized with images, mantras and the mandalas, respectively. Thus mandalas constitute the mind supports.

The mandala is made up of the center – the origin; walls and doors circumventing the origin and the gates that lead from one lyre to the other. Mandalas represent three forms of deities : the peaceful deities, wrathful deities and the sexual imagery.

In the construction of mandalas, colors play an important role in depicting the directional properties and significance. In the construction of mandalas, colors are very important in indicating various levels (pranganas). *Maha vairocana sutra* and *Charkrasambhara tantra* prescribe colors to various parts of a mandala. The center is designated with white. The walls of mandala are painted in different colors. Directionally, east is white, west is red, north green and south yellow

As quoted in the *Chandamaharosana Tantra*, the five basic colors have their astral (emotional) representation in Buddhist iconography. Black symbolizes negative emotions like killing and anger, white denotes tranquility, rest and thinking, yellow represents restraints and nourishing, red for subjugation and summoning, and green means exorcism.

Different tantric schools have different color schemes. The *Kalachakra tantra* associates colors with basic elements. The four elements air, fire, water and earth are assigned with different colors: blue (or black), red, white and yellow, respectively. Similarly, These four elements are further represent geometric shapes: semi-circular, triangular, circular, and square respectively. The confluence of these colors shapes and features give *mandalas* the characteristic meditative aura for tantric practitioners.

<i>Element</i>	<i>Color</i>	<i>Organs</i>	<i>Shapes</i>
Air	Blue/black	Ears	Semi circle
Fire	Red	tongue	Triangle
Water	White	Eyes	Circle
Earth	Yellow	Nose	Square

Tibetan art and iconography is all about visual imagery of sensory perceptions. The mysticism of tantric Buddhist enriches the art with splash of color shape and detail. Among various schools of Buddhism Tibetan tantricim stands apart for its visual appeal to the layman and spiritual intonations for the monastic cadre. Buddhist cultural festivals of Himalayan region show this form of color and form where the entire religious mysticism takes the form of mask dances.

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